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THE QUEST FOR FORM:
HART CRANE'S THE BRIDGE, WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS'
PATERSON AND DIANE WAKOSKI'S GREED

by
Jane Cocalis

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial
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VITA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
VITA	iii
 Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE EPIC TRADITION: FROM HOMER TO WHITMAN	16
Transformation of the Heroic Ideal.	17
The Evolution of Poetic Language	33
The Metapoetic Voice in the Verse Epic.	41
III. HART CRANE'S <u>THE BRIDGE</u>	54
The Modern Dilemma	54
The Heroic Ideal in <u>The Bridge</u>	74
The Role of Language in <u>The Bridge</u>	89
Hart Crane's Metapoetic Voice	102
IV. WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' <u>PATERSON</u>	119
The Heroic Ideal in <u>Paterson</u>	134
The Role of Language in <u>Paterson</u>	147
Williams' Metapoetic Voice.	162
V. DIANE WAKOSKI'S <u>GREED</u>	181
The Heroic Ideal in <u>Greed</u>	192
The Role of Language in <u>Greed</u>	205
The Metapoetic Voice in <u>Greed</u>	216
VI. CONCLUSION	232
WORKS CITED	239
APPROVAL SHEET.	247

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"...it must be carefully remember'd that first-class literature does not shine by any luminosity of its own; nor do its poems. They grow of circumstance, and are evolutionary."

--Walt Whitman

This study began as an attempt to answer the question, "Is there anything we can call 'epic' poetry in the modern era?" When we look at modern poems, we find it difficult to classify any of them as epics; they do not seem to exhibit the set of features we consider essential to the epic verse form. These features include a hero capable of performing feats at the upper limits of human ability, a narrative of great length and panoramic scale, the public and ceremonial nature of the poem and its use of elevated language. Modern poets do not seem to incorporate these epic features, at least as described above, into their works. For this reason, we have come to use the term "long poem" when confronted with these epic-like works. Although we sense that they are in some way epic, we are not quite sure how to label them. We would, however, expect to find a conventional

set of features in the epics of earlier periods, such as The Iliad, The Aeneid and Beowulf. But once we become familiar with these epics, we find that they do not really contain conventional elements either.

Our problem stems from trying to decide which poems are epic on the basis of whether or not they include a series of key features such as the ones I have mentioned above. Utilizing such a brief and over-simplified list of features has caused us to lose our sense of the full range and complexity of epic poetry. Rather than being descriptive, we have become prescriptive in our thinking concerning epic form.

Moreover, we tend to conclude that epics present certain features in a characteristic manner or, to put it another way, that epics make "conventional" use of a set of formal elements. To think of epics in this way is to overlook the fact that their genius lies in the poet's ability to reformulate the features of an earlier poetic tradition. A brief example concerning The Iliad and The Aeneid will illustrate this point.

When we read The Iliad, we might regard Achilles' behavior toward Agamemnon as foolish, and his allowing Patroklos to take his place in battle as anything but heroic unless we understand what the

Homeric poet wishes to show the audience about heroism.¹ We would have to know that because the Homeric poet's listeners were familiar with the story of the Trojan War, the poet chose not to focus on a narrative which was well-known to the audience. Instead, the poet depicted the actions of certain warriors for the purpose of revealing a portrait of human nature. As a result of these efforts, we regard The Iliad as a great epic, because heroism is depicted not as success in battle, but as the result of marshalling oneself to enter battle with full knowledge of its tragic consequences.

In contrast to the portrayal of heroism in The Iliad, Virgil gives us a protagonist in The Aeneid who becomes heroic by putting aside personal considerations to further the cause of building a nation. Aeneas ultimately becomes an unselfish actor whose goal is the founding of Rome. Virgil's goal is to imbue the Roman city-state with an immortal past by linking it directly to the historical eminence of Troy and to the gods. He accomplishes this purpose by presenting Aeneas, who is both a Trojan and the son of the goddess Aphrodite, as Rome's chief ancestor. The trials which Virgil's hero undergoes are framed as psychological, rather than physical, challenges that he must endure in

the course of his epic journey.²

Thus the conception of what is heroic is quite different in The Aeneid than in The Iliad, even though Virgil shaped his epic with the earlier, Homeric tradition firmly in mind. Virgil's purpose, unlike the Iliadic poet's, was not to relate the misfortunes of humans at war; rather it was to construct a "pedigree" for his contemporary, Augustan society.

Even this brief comparison of the heroic figures in The Iliad and The Aeneid illustrates how the needs of the poet's own time direct the poet in shaping the features of a given poem. It also offers an example of the means by which a poet can acknowledge the preceding tradition without merely repeating it. Virgil creates his hero with a conscious knowledge of the tradition that has been established by the Homeric poet, and Virgil's greatness is, in part, his ability to employ that knowledge in a resonant manner. In this instance, one outcome of Virgil's portrayal of the hero would be a comparison by his reader, who presumably has knowledge of The Iliad, of the relative merits of Greece and Rome. Through his reworking of the earlier poem, Virgil invites the reader to decide which nation memorialized in epic poetry is greater: the one known

for its tragic war or the one which will be remembered for its glorious peacetime accomplishments?

If there is a feature which all writers of epic verse share, it is the desire to write a great and lasting work. This is perhaps the only element we may list as a "standard" feature without the need for further explanation. My earlier description of epic poetry consists of a number of phrases which are almost useless in preparing an accurate definition of epic verse. For each one of the great epics, created out of the ethos of a particular poet's time and place, is quite distinct from its predecessors. Because it responds not only to the needs of society as perceived by that poet but also to the artistic tradition which precedes it, each of these epics transcends the shape and content of its predecessors.³

It is, in fact, the successful reformulation of what has come to be seen by the contemporary audience as "conventional" elements of verse epic which gives an epic its own character and its place in the tradition. Michael Bernstein remarks, in his discussion of modern epic poetry, that

The conclusion that arises from any comparative historical survey is, perhaps

dishearteningly, that no one constellation of fixed attributes, no set of necessary and sufficient elements, can be isolated that would allow us to determine by a purely formal analysis whether or not a poem is an epic. (13)

Unlike Bernstein, I would argue that there are shared attributes--these are, in fact, what constitute the tradition. They are not "fixed" elements but evolutionary ones, and their changing form is far from "disheartening." As Alastair Fowler notes in Kinds of Literature, "Only variations or modifications of convention have literary significance" (18). Epic conventions, then, are more appropriately thought of as those features of the verse epic which are successfully re-articulated by the next epic poet. As K.W. Gransden explains: "therein lies the strength of epic: it can mutate and reshape traditional motifs..." (Winnifreth xi).

Yet, why is it that we find it more difficult to classify modern poems as epics than the works of earlier centuries? In general, we have very little problem discerning the manner in which the genre has evolved, and therefore pronouncing that a particular poem is an

epic, until we reach the Augustan age. Up to that time, a tradition had been maintained that directly linked the epic poetry of the Greeks to that of the Romans and, finally, to that of the English. It was during the eighteenth century that this tradition began to break down due to a shift in the perception of the role of art in society. This schism resulted in a major reconceptualization of the epic by Wordsworth in the nineteenth century. In formulating his epic, Wordsworth would respond not only to the needs of his own age but to the concerns of the preceding age as well.

The eighteenth-century poets undertook two literary endeavors which, by their contradictory nature, exemplify the larger questions concerning artistic form that prevailed at this critical juncture. The first task was the preparation of contemporary translations of the works of the Homeric poet and Virgil by Pope and Dryden, respectively. As Douglas Knight comments regarding Pope's effort, the preparation of modern translations of The Iliad and The Odyssey "ran counter to the developing mistrust of poetry in his time" (77). In addition to this general distrust of poetry by extraliterary factions, the Neo-Augustan poets undercut their own efforts to resurrect the classical

epics by producing mock-epics, such as Dryden's MacFlecknoe and Pope's The Rape of the Lock. While Pope and Dryden were not attacking the form of the epic, they were expressing their belief that the paucity of political and cultural achievement in their time was rendering the form useless. As much as they wished to resuscitate the classical epic form for the purposes of glorifying their own age, they judged England to have lost its exalted position of leadership and its previous grandeur. As Knight explains:

The conception of the meaning of a society ha[d] so altered that, where once its center was occupied by the hero and all he stood for, now [in Pope's The Rape of the Lock] it is occupied by a pretty woman before a dressing table upon which stands the tribute of the corners of the earth. Similarly in The Dunciad, and of course far more unequivocally, Bentley and Blackmore [Pope's protagonists] are castigated not for what they have done so much as for the pretenses, by them and society, about the value of what they have done in terms of significant

poetry or scholarship. (78)

The irony of trying to produce useful translations of classical epics in light of this predicament becomes transformed with the production of mock epic poems into a palpable tension between the exhausted, older epic form and a lack of the social vitalism necessary to inspire the creation of a new one.

While the literary establishment attacked what it perceived to be a national crisis of leadership, it was being counter-attacked as to its essential value to society. For advances in science, such as Newtonian physics, had spurred the development of a dominant philosophical position which favored logical reasoning over intuitive knowledge. Art, which relied on the imagination, became suspect as a method of revealing universal truth; and, as an artistic form, poetry was construed to be of ornamental, rather than essential, value.

As much as Dryden and Pope would have liked to recover the classics as a useful exemplar for their contemporary society, it was impossible to do so given their own concerns about the failing condition of England and the philosophical charges being brought concerning the nature and value of poetry. Thomas

Vogler states that "something happened during [the Romantic movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries] that crystallized the impossibility of writing the epic poem..." (2). What became the generally recognized state of affairs in the age of Wordsworth and Coleridge was well underway in the age of Pope and Dryden.

Yet Vogler's statement suggests--and it is, in fact, the thesis of his book, Preludes to Vision--that "the epic genre, as formally defined, ceased to be viable after Milton" and was displaced by an unfulfillable "desire" to write epic (2). I do not agree with Vogler that the long poems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are "preludes" rather than epics. Epic poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has a markedly different coloring, however, and is more problematic in some ways than earlier epic. James E. Miller, Jr. offers an example of this difficulty in his consideration of Whitman's Leaves of Grass. Miller acknowledges that Whitman reformulated the verse epic but shows discomfort in retaining the term "epic" and speaks of Leaves of Grass as "personal epic," "anti-epic" and "lyric-epic" (The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction 36 and passim). M.L. Rosenthal and

Sally M. Gall have a similar problem with using the term "epic" for long poems of the modern era and find it necessary to classify them in a new genre, the "lyrical sequence." They contend that while some poet may occasionally find a way to construct "a long, continuous narrative poem or logically or thematically developed one," for the most part, "a fatal ennui of such efforts does seem to have set in..." (6).

Rosenthal and Gall's proposal to classify any long poem lacking a primarily narrative, logical or thematic structure as a lyrical sequence will not aid us, I think, in attaining a better understanding of the romantic and modern epic forms. This relabeling does little more than group certain poems under a new heading. James E. Miller's tactic of attempting to modify the term epic without losing it completely is more useful in that it indicates that while the epic genre continues to exist, it has undergone some modulation. Alastair Fowler, in Kinds of Literature, offers a means by which we might reconcile our feeling that poems such as Leaves of Grass are epics yet somehow different from earlier examples of the form. Fowler remarks:

We are...familiar with the idea of the lyric

as the dominant mode of nineteenth-century literature. Almost every genre, we know, became lyric then--in the sense that its conventions were modulated expressively.... In the nineteenth century, 'lyric,' by then a vogue word, acquired the elegaic sense 'expressive,' so that Ruskin could define lyric poetry as the expression by the poet of his own feelings. (206)

Employing Fowler's nomenclature, we see that the lyric, while a distinct poetic genre, may also be considered a literary "mode" which tempers or modulates a genre, such as the verse epic, to such an extent that it gives that genre a markedly different character. Thus we sense that The Prelude or Leaves of Grass are not "true" epics because they have been saturated with a lyric quality that gives each poem an "expressive" or subjective coloring.

We should also recall that a lyric poem is usually construed to be a short piece which expresses the thoughts and emotions of a single speaker from a personal point of view. The intention of the poet, as realized in The Prelude, Leaves of Grass and such modernist long poems as Hart Crane's The Bridge, was

not the construction of a series of short "songs," but a long work of interrelated units. Even in poems featuring a central speaker, the controlling vision, while "subjective" in one sense, presents what the poet perceives are the common, though wide-ranging and even fragmented, concerns of the society. The goal of such poetry is a public one as it seeks not to offer an individual's view of a particular occasion, but one spiritual leader's view of how society may redeem itself. The quest in such poems as The Prelude and Leaves of Grass is not consolation for the private soul; it is aid for the universal self. And this is the characteristic posture of epic, rather than lyric, poetry.

There is further evidence of this epic quest in the poet's extended commitment to his or her artistic work. The poet does not chronicle a discrete experience, then move on to the next lyric moment. Instead, the poem is conceived of as a lifelong compilation and refinement of human experience with the goal of aiding society in achieving a sense of identity and purpose.

Thus, if we can allow for the shift from the "objective" voice of the Homeric poet to the "subjective" voice of Wordsworth without declaring an immediate need for a new genre classification, we will

see that in both instances the poet is interacting with his contemporary audience to shape a collective understanding of what it means to be human. As Wordsworth notes in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, the object of poetry is "truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative...."⁴

By permitting ourselves to see that lyricism may affect these long poems "modally," as Fowler suggests, we are able to realize that the verse epic is a most enduring and protean generic form of art. Starting with a more complex definition of the genre, one that admits the epic poem's tremendous capacity for change while maintaining an overall sense that is characteristically epic, we provide the means for discussing a greater number of poems without resorting to the use of extra labels which are essentially prescriptive. Rethinking the epic genre also allows us to admit freely that the critical task of analyzing "long" poems remains important to understanding not only the individual poems but also how the poets have reworked the epic tradition over a lengthy period of time. With this idea of epic as an evolving form in mind, we can move on to investigate some specific examples of the form.

Notes

1 "Homer" is a noun commonly taken to mean "hostage" and is, therefore, a generic rather than a proper name. Also, there is some dispute as to the sex of the author of The Odyssey. I believe it is more appropriate, therefore, to use the term "Homeric poet."

2 According to C.M. Bowra: "The essence of [Virgil's] conception [of the hero] is that a man's virtus is shown less in battle and physical danger than in the defeat of his own weakness" (From Virgil to Milton 84).

3 At least two factors regarding influence must be taken into account: was a preceding epic (or epics) known to the poet and did the poet believe that work had any relevance to his or her own artistic endeavors? The tradition which precedes the writing of each epic affects that tradition only to the extent that the poet feels the influence of that tradition.

4 All references to Wordsworth's poetry and prose are from William Wordsworth, Stephen Gill, ed. (Oxford UP, 1984).

CHAPTER II

THE EPIC TRADITION: FROM HOMER TO WHITMAN

"Tell me of the mystery of the inexhaustible,
forever-unfolding creative spark."

--D. H. Lawrence

Any study of the epic tradition must necessarily be limited given the panoramic nature of the topic itself. The discussion in this chapter will concern the evolution of three elements of epic poetry--the heroic ideal, the use of poetic language and the metapoetic voice of the epic--from classical times through the work of Walt Whitman. The continuing evolution of these elements into the Modernist period will be the subject of the chapters which follow. These features have been selected on the basis of their significant contribution to the characteristic shape of the Modernist long poem as crafted by three particular poets: Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams and Diane Wakoski. My discussion of pre-Modernist epics is by no means an exhaustive one, but, rather, is meant to present some background for the consideration of the three Modernist long poems which are the focus of this study.

Transformation of the Heroic Ideal

The foundations of epic are obscure because epic begins as an oral tradition and at a time very distant from our own. Not only must we speculate about the form in which the older, oral works have come down to us, e.g., the Homeric poems and Beowulf, but also about the epic's precursors. Gertrude Levy concludes, after examining some of the earliest epics, that the origins of epic lie in myth and ritual and, further, that the role of the epic hero is derived from that of the gods in these older narratives.¹ It appears, then, that an early reworking of form occurred when epic began to take shape as a separate entity from myth and ritualistic narrative and that one of the characteristics of epic, as opposed to these older forms of narrative, was the selection of a mortal being as the hero.

Whether due to an emerging sense of the human self or another cause, the epic poem takes as its focus the extent to which the human being, rather than the deity, has the power to control life. In Gilgamesh, which is perhaps the oldest surviving epic, Gilgamesh seeks the means to become immortal. Though he fails in his quest, the topic of human mortality comes to the

foreground in this early epic. In The Iliad, the hero's struggle, whether it is that of the Greek Achilles or the Trojan Hektor, is framed in terms of what the protagonist is able to accomplish while faced with the knowledge of the fragility of his own life. "Ah me, what will become of me?" cries Achilles in the midst of battle. And:

'...why does the heart within me debate
on these things
Since I know that it is the cowards who
walk out of the fighting,
but if one is to win honour in battle,
he must by all means
stand his ground strongly, whether he be
struck or strike down another'

(XI.401-410)²

The hero in the Greek epic becomes a great figure by means of an ability to fight in the face of a strong sense of death.

The narrative of epic poetry takes as its primary focus an investigation of human possibilities rather than the gods' influence over human lives. Preternatural power is still an important feature of the narrative, but now it serves as a means of defining the

limits of human achievement. The tales of the gods have become well-established in the mythic tradition to the point where their supernatural achievements have become a conventionalized element of the narrative. The newer, epic form takes on a different task: discovering the extent of human power in a transitory world. However, as Thomas Greene notes, we should view the epic

not as an attempt to inflate the hero's naturally meager capacities but as rather the opposite, in terms of [the epic's] historical development--as a diminishing of his capacities to approximate more closely those we know. (197)

With the hero's "descent" into mortality, the epic form becomes more distinct from mythic and ritualistic narratives which are more closely related to religious ceremony. The epic begins as a consideration of human capability, first in a world controlled by deities, and by the nineteenth century, in a world of suffused power with which the protagonist hopes to unite by achieving an equal amount of power. In the modern age, the human being seeks to become self-enabling and the universe is perceived not to be a co-equal, but, rather, the material out of which the individual

constructs an identity.

In the earliest formulations of epic, although the hero is a member of the aristocratic class, he nevertheless faces the mysterious challenge which all human beings confront, that is, the need to understand and gain control over his life. As Greene remarks, "The epic is the poem which replaces divine worship with human awe, awe for the act which is prodigious yet human" (198).

In general this conception of the aristocratic yet mortal hero remains vital in the English tradition until the major reevaluation of the epic in the Augustan age. The most significant outcome of this upheaval, in terms of the structure of the epic, is Wordsworth's proposing of the common man--or woman--as the new heroic figure. This individual seems as genuinely heroic to Wordsworth as the aristocratic warrior of the older verse epic. Common valor becomes Wordsworth's theme and with his focus on the capabilities of the average person, Wordsworth serves as a direct precursor for the Modernist poets.

In shaping his Romantic epic, The Prelude, Wordsworth responded to many of the artistic concerns raised during the age of Dryden and Pope. If the

traditional leadership of the upper class was played out and offered no inspirational figures to be memorialized in poetry, then it would be necessary to look elsewhere for a new model of heroism. Wordsworth believed the democratic revolutions in France and the United States would provide an opportunity for new heroes to emerge. These heroes would come from the citizenry who were fundamental to the establishment of those democratic states. If the classical epics seemed inappropriate models for the times, with their power invested in an aristocratic class and a pantheon of intrusive gods, then a truer model of poetry for contemporary times might be based on the individual's experience and, in this case, Wordsworth's own perception of life.

As with earlier conceptions about the nature of art, Wordsworth's poetic created its own share of problems, not the least of which is reconciling his dual perception of the hero as both an imaginative poet-persona and, alternately, the common citizen. In the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth admits that the poet has a "more lively sensibility," "a greater knowledge of human nature," and "a more comprehensive soul" than the average human being (603). Yet he seems to believe that if the poet can "confound and identify

his own feelings with theirs" (604), both poet and commoner can exercise their imaginative faculties to the fullest extent: "the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion" (606).

Wordsworth envisions the poet here not as the literary custodian of the collective identity of his people, but as the spiritual leader who helps to link each individual's imaginative potential to the Universal Spirit so that each person may become active in formulating his or her own sense of being in the world. In those "spots of time," during which each person is able to reach the apex and "invisibly repair" the rent between the self and the universe, that individual becomes the heroic figure of which the poet-persona of The Prelude is exemplary.³

Wordsworth's reconceptualization of the heroic ideal, which displaces the aristocratic warrior-hero of older epic with the poet as heroic leader of the people, also reformulates the epic battle which previously took place between two external forces, such as the Trojans and Achaeans in The Iliad. The battle now takes the form of an internal, or subjective, struggle for enlightened consciousness via the exercise of the

capacious imagination within each of us. Poet and reader assume an active role in the creation of personal identity and the individual's highest achievement is a coming together with the grand spirit of the universe.

Thus Wordsworth conceives of the poet as a kind of helpmate to the common person as that individual realizes the potential to become a perfected human being, that is, one who has developed a sense of self within the universe and is therefore prepared to function as a true citizen in a democratic world. As we know, in time Wordsworth began to question his own ability to sustain this imaginative union; he expresses such sentiments in "Resolution and Independence." However, his dual conceptualization of the poet and commoner as societal hero--as well as his fear of losing the ability to be a spiritual leader for the people--are features which remain characteristic of the epic in our own time.

When we compare Walt Whitman's poetry to Wordsworth's, we are reminded of Virgil's position with relation to Homer. Both Virgil and Whitman retained many of the features of their predecessor's poetry; yet they were charged with reformulating the epic so that it would respond to the needs of a newer nation and one

that envisioned itself as a new world power.

There are actually two nineteenth-century American poets who undertook the enormous task of producing an epic that would be commensurate with the as-yet unlimited potential of the New World. Whitman's effort was preceded by that of Joel Barlow, and Barlow's inability to create a great epic for the nation offers an illuminating commentary on Whitman's later achievement. Joel Barlow's work is hardly well-known even to students of American literature. Because his talents were limited, Barlow's main contribution is to the historical, rather than the artistic, development of literature in the United States. Along with the other writers in a collaborative group known as the "Connecticut Wits," Barlow emulated the satirical style of the English Neo-Augustan writers. The Wits produced such mock epics as John Trumbull's M'Fingal (1775-82) and Barlow's The Hasty-Pudding (1796).

Barlow appears to have learned little more from Dryden and Pope than an ornamental style and he clothed both versions of his lengthy epic in the trappings of the English mock epic. In The Vision of Columbus (1787) and the revised version, entitled The Columbiad (1807), Barlow employed heroic couplets and "lofty"

diction to establish his work as a constituent of the great classical and European tradition of the verse epic.

Interestingly enough, Barlow chose Christopher Columbus to be his epic hero. Although Barlow was unable to do justice to what seems a felicitous choice of protagonist, Walt Whitman, Hart Crane and Williams Carlos Williams would also choose Columbus to be an heroic figure in various poems but to greater effect. Barlow's failure is due, in part, to his inability to create an appropriate milieu in which to place his hero. In The Columbiad, Barlow constructs his narrative around the relationship between Columbus and Hesper, the latter a deistic emissary who guides Columbus on his symbolic journey to the New World. Barlow's hero is a classically-fashioned moral protagonist who must depend upon preternatural aid to achieve his goal. Thus he becomes a regressive figure in terms of the historical model for the epic hero.

Another feature of the older epic tradition which Barlow adopts is the use of a known historical event, i.e., Columbus' voyages, as the vehicle for what the poet construes to be his larger poetic statement. In this case, the tenor of the poem is announcing the

moral mission of the United States to become the leading nation of the world. This theme is in keeping with Barlow's understanding of the idea of the Translatio which held that as one civilization declined, another would rise to take its place. As Rome had succeeded Greece as the preeminent world power, England had succeeded Rome. According to this scenario of westward progression, the United States was destined to be the next reigning nation. Columbus becomes the symbolic founder of the nation, much as Virgil conceives of Aeneas' role with relation to the founding of Rome.

But Joel Barlow lacked the imagination of a Virgil, and his epic plan, which was obviously based on that of The Aeneid, had little chance of succeeding. Barlow's audience, unlike that of earlier civilizations, had formulated no generally-held conception of national identity. Barlow presumed an American consciousness which, in actuality, remained for the poet to develop as part of the epic task. There is little evidence to suggest that Barlow understood that his audience lacked a collective identity; in any event, he had insufficient artistic ability to address the need.

In sum, Barlow's conception of the heroic ideal was a poor copy of the Virgilian hero and his poetic

scheme failed to take into account the primary need to formulate an American identity. The poet was critically drubbed by the fledgling American critical establishment for paraphrasing the time-worn style of the Old World. As James Russell Lowell remarked, "Joel Barlow made the lowest bid for the construction of our epos, got the contract, and delivered in due season the Columbiad" (Ruland 312).

If Barlow's attempts at epic could be labelled epic parodies, the rise of Walt Whitman and the creation of his Leaves of Grass might be thought of as an Odyssean adventure. For Whitman, like Odysseus, literally built for himself the identity which the occasion demanded. As an itinerant newspaper writer, editor and journeyman printer, Whitman apprenticed himself to America in preparation for becoming its "proletarian bard" (Cowley, Leaves of Grass viii).

Unlike Wordsworth, who stood apart from his "rustic" subjects by virtue of his social background and formal education, Whitman did not have to work at "confounding his identity" with that of the common people because he always considered himself a member of the working class. It is on this basis that he billed himself as Walt, rather than Walter, Whitman, "one of

the roughs." However, only an illustration of the artist, in common working garb, with shirt sleeves rolled back, served to announce the authorship of the earliest edition of Leaves of Grass. This depiction of the author as working-class poet is as much as artistic fabrication as are Whitman's poems. In publishing Leaves of Grass, Whitman created not only the epic but the epic poet whom he believed the United States needed.

I have noted Joel Barlow's failure to realize that the United States had not achieved a distinctive sense of itself. Whitman, on the other hand, construed the development of a national identity as his central poetic task. Thus he perceived himself to be "in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of [his] immediate days, and of current America..." ("A Backward Glance" 658).⁴ And the genius of his poetry, particularly "Song of Myself," lay in Whitman's seemingly paradoxical realization that the identity of the society as a whole would be based on its fundamental individualism. In "Song of Myself," the poet-persona chronicles various American lives, such as those of the carpenter and the spinning-girl, as well as the prostitute and the opium eater. For Whitman wished to speak

"in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than [had] any hitherto book or poem" ("A Backward Glance" 658).

The cataloguing of the details of American life, which is an essential feature of Whitman's poetic technique, is a characteristic of Homeric poetry and appears to be a quite conscious reworking of this feature of classical epic. Through accretion of detail, the poet develops a portrait of the nation which is panoramic, rather than exclusionary, and thereby infuses the poem with an epic sense of breadth. But as Roy Harvey Pearce notes, in this "new heroic poem," Whitman was "revealing, not memorializing" the national character (The Continuity of American Poetry 83). Unlike the Homeric poet, who sought to reinforce and hand forward through time a portrait of Greek civilization, Whitman's aim was not to create a "direct or descriptive or epic" poem in the classical sense of those terms (Preface 8), but rather to evoke the intangible essence of the American character because: "The indirect is always as great and real as the direct. The spirit receives from the body just as much as it gives to the body" (Preface 21). Thus Whitman's tallying is not merely a compilation of the facts of daily existence. The function of the poet as namer and cataloguer of the

individuals who comprise the United States is Adamic: in naming them, the poet captures and honors their essential character. Thus "The carpenter dresses his plank" and "The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel" ("Song" 39). These are not merely parts of a descriptive list but the building up of a collective sense of the citizenry of the United States.

As does Wordsworth, Whitman looks to the common people as the basis for his heroic ideal, but he is able to resolve Wordsworth's difficult conception of the dual hero by becoming both a democratic citizen and the poet-persona in his epic. During his lengthy tally of the American people in "Song of Myself," Whitman includes "the jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws [who] works at his case" (39) and later "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos....no stander above men and women or apart from them" (50). The figure of Whitman within the poem is particularized to include the common individual (the jour printer) as well as the artistic persona.

However, Whitman's most boldly conceived statement of the central role of the poet-persona comes in the opening lines of "Song of Myself":

I celebrate myself,
 And what I assume you shall assume,
 For every atom belonging to me as good
 belongs to you (27)

These lines capture what is essential in Whitman's conception of the heroic ideal. He dons, or "assumes," the leadership role and immediately urges the reader to strive toward becoming the poet's equal. Where Wordsworth hoped to be able to encourage the individual to achieve communion with the spirit of the universe, Whitman declares that the communion will come as a result of the reader engaging with the artist in the poetic act itself:

...the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in the highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle;...the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem,...the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. ("D. Vistas" 992-993)

Thus Whitman tells us that "every atom" of the poem, and of the universe of the poem, belongs to the reader as

well as the poet.

Further, he declares that every atom is good, in the fullest, pre-lapsarian sense of the word. It is Whitman's hope that the reader will become confident of the fact that the creative act is not only the highest human achievement but an immortal act in that it engenders a never-ending process of imaginative creation.

Thus the glorification by the earliest epic poets of the heroic deeds of aristocratic warriors evolves in Whitman's Leaves of Grass into a continuous delineation of the Human Being who stands in the New World as the incarnation of the "democratic average and basic equality" ("A Backward Glance" 664).

While Whitman realized that if the United States did not actively cultivate its spiritual well-being, democracy would become merely "the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average" ("D. Vistas" 958), he publicly exuded a steady belief in the integrity of the nation. America did not need to apologize for being "rude and coarse"; its very lack of polish was its strength. Where Barlow sought to overlay America with an Old World coating of grandeur, Whitman declared that the country and its citizens, as they stood, lacked nothing: "The Americans of all nations at any time upon

the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (Preface 5).

Once Whitman had accomplished his goal of securing for the nation a sense of identity, it would seem that the poets who succeeded him would only need to elaborate upon Whitman's epic celebration of America. But the philosophical crisis of the late nineteenth century would force a generation of poets to search again for the basis of assurance which Whitman's ebullient poetry generally displayed.

The Evolution of Poetic Language

Just as the heroic ideal has been changed to meet the needs of the time, so has the use of epic language. There are many elements of poetic language which might be examined, but, as in my discussion of the heroic ideal, I wish to concentrate on some of the aspects which make the innovations of the Modernist poets more comprehensible. The five aspects of poetic language I will address are: repetition, parataxis, digression, poetic language and the formulation of an American idiom.

There are three elements employed in the

construction of primary epic, or poetry which was constituted orally, that have been used in an altogether different manner in the Modernist epic. The first of these is the use of repetition by the poet. The most obvious reason for the repeating of words or phrases in primary epic is to aid the poet with the recitation of a lengthy work, which quite possibly took place over a period of several days. Repetition serves as a prompting device which allows the poet time to mentally organize the next recitation. It also reinforces selected images and events for the listener. Secondary, or written, epic has no need of exact repetition, since lines or passages may be reviewed at the discretion of the reader. But, as with oral epic, repetition in the written epic remains the means by which the poet can emphasize a significant image or phrase.

It is in such later epics as Whitman's Leaves of Grass that repetition begins to take on another function. As the narrative structure of the verse epic becomes looser, that is, less chronological, repetition or near-repetition of image or phrase becomes a means of structuring the poem. In Whitman's Leaves, the use of repetition is secondary, however, to the development of a long, rhythmic line and of a complex language which

suggests a blending of everyday speech, powerful oratory and the authoritative voice of religious texts. Repetition of phrase and image becomes a more primary structural feature in the Modernist epics of such writers as Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams.

A second feature of the oral epics which is adopted by Whitman and the Modernist poets is the paratactic style of writing. Parataxis is the grammatical principle of juxtaposing clauses with either no formal signal of their relationship to one another or with the simple use of a coordinating conjunction such as "and" or "but." A feature of earlier, less sophisticated language usage, paratactic style was superseded by a compound or complex relationship of clauses, termed hypotaxis, as language evolved. Parataxis was necessarily an integral part of the form of early epics as no alternate means of structuring clauses was available. When Whitman returns to the use of paratactic clauses in the "tallying" sections of "Song of Myself," it is with the intention of re-empowering parataxis, by alluding to its use in the Bible and the older epics, and thereby evoking an authoritative tone in his poetry.

A third significant element of the oral language

tradition is the use of digressive episodes within the framework of the main narrative. Digressionary passages may serve several purposes. They enhance the telling of a story which is familiar to the audience; they offer the poet an opportunity to display his or her gift for artistic elaboration; and they give breadth to the poem through the inclusion of supplementary material, both mundane and heroic. Digression becomes an important feature of the so-called "confessional" school of poetry in the modern period, though its purpose is quite different from that in the oral poem.

In Chapter I, I mentioned the notion of elevated diction as a conventional element of epic poetry. The use of a poetic language, i.e., something other than the everyday idiom, in the verse epic is a feature that carries over from the older forms of myth and ritual which achieve their authoritative power, in part, from the use of a "special" form of language. Similarly, the elevated diction of the epic signals to the audience the poet's intention to present a work of serious import. The epic convention of elevated language usage continued until the mock-epic poetry of eighteenth-century England exploited such diction for the purpose of showing that it had lost its integrity.

A major reevaluation of what constitutes poetic diction subsequently occurred in the prose and poetry of Wordsworth. Because he chose to refashion epic language into one which more closely resembled everyday speech, he found himself forced to defend his poetry against the charge that "many of his expressions [were] too familiar and not of sufficient dignity" (Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads 591-592). In tandem with his belief that the new heroic values would come from the citizen class, Wordsworth encouraged poets to follow his lead in using a language commensurate with that level of subject. Since beauty and dignity were inherent in daily incidents, they would also be found in the common speech which would serve as the basis for a new and "truthful" poetic diction. Wordsworth even hints at the value of using prose in poetry, thus anticipating the Modernist phase of the epic form (Preface to Lyrical Ballads 601). In rejecting the "elevated" language pattern which had come to be considered an essential component of epic poetry, Wordsworth claimed that this "common inheritance" of ceremonial diction had become worn out by second-rate poets (Preface to Lyrical Ballads 600-601). It should be replaced, he thought, by

a selection of the language really spoken

by men; that his selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling, will of itself form a distinction far greater than would at first be imagined, and will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life.

(Preface to Lyrical Ballads 602)

Thus Wordsworth proposed that the language which belongs to all of the people would be of the highest value to the poet.⁵ The language of the Universal Spirit would no longer be an elevated dialect to be used only by a special group of people, whether priests or poets; now every individual would have access to the language of higher spiritual consciousness.

Wordsworth's declaration that the language of the poet and the people was one and the same also effected a new relationship between poet and audience. No longer the high priest who holds himself or herself above the mass of humanity by virtue of possessing a powerful and abstruse language, the poet enters into a bilateral dialogue with other human beings. This dialogue becomes more expansive in Whitman's epic poetry where the poetic tone is infused with the confidence of forging an ideal relationship among all individuals.

For Whitman's poetic successors, this sense of comradeship became more muted, more provisional; yet the spirit of human fellowship remained at the core of the epic task. Thus Wordsworth's move toward collapsing poetic diction into everyday speech signals a change in the formerly hierarchical relationship of poet-priest and audience.

The final aspect of language usage that I wish to discuss concerns Whitman's vision of a distinctively American dialect. For the United States to become artistically independent, Whitman believed that an American poetic language must be crafted to distinguish the literature of the United States from that of the English-speaking mother country. This new idiom would be derived from English; Whitman clearly envisioned the English language as the stem from which new branches of the language might flourish. English was "brawny enough and limber and full enough" to support such off-shoots or dialects as might be promulgated from it (Preface 25). Whitman's own synthetic language incorporated Greek ("kosmos") and Latinate ("influx and efflux") terms, variant spellings ("loafe"), colloquialisms ("a fancy-man," "a rowdy"), artfully-conceived rustic phrases ("barbaric yawp") and new verbs ("I tramp a

perpetual journey").

In these "language experiments," as he called his poems, Whitman not only spurred the development of an American poetic vocabulary, but also worked toward solving a problem that had arisen as a result of Wordsworth's displacement of an elevated poetic language by one that attempted to mimic ordinary speech. Once the initial strangeness of a poetry written in everyday language had worn off, the artist was left with a poetic diction which appeared to have lost its authority. What, after all, was the difference between poetic diction and prose if variant spatial arrangement on the printed page was the only distinguishing feature?

Whitman sought to overcome the leveling effect of using ordinary speech by infusing that speech with a new poetic energy so that the reader again would be able to sense the extraordinary that lay hidden within the mundane world. The American dialect, as Whitman conceived of it, was a reworking of common American speech. He infused it with foreign and invented terms, participial phrases and inverted syntax, among other grammatical features, to give readers a heightened sense of their own language. Though Whitman's poetic diction is characteristically American, it is not the language

of everyday usage. It is, like the language of all epics, a poetic artifice. But the use of the common American dialect as the basis for poetic diction, which Whitman espoused, has continued to be the dominant mode of poetic language into the Modernist period of epic verse.

The Metapoetic Voice in the Verse Epic

Thus far I have been discussing the features of epic as if they were discrete elements of poetic form. This is not true, of course, and the interrelatedness of these elements becomes quite apparent in any discussion concerning metapoetry. While the metapoetic voice of a work, like other elements of form, is employed to achieve an artistic effect, it is in some respects of a higher order than those other elements because it creates a consciousness of the work of art as art. At the metapoetic level, the poetic voice reveals the poet's perception of the role of art in society and the relationship of art to life.

The term "voice" is used here in the broadest possible sense, for while poets may make statements by utilizing a speaker or their authorial voice, they also employ other, and more oblique, means of delivering

their commentary on the nature of art. When we read The Iliad, for example, we learn of the poet's special role as intermediary between the gods and earthly mortals from the opening lines of the epic: "Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus and its devastation" (59). This idea is elaborated in Book II:

Tell me now, you Muses who have your homes
on Olympus.

For you, who are goddesses, are there, and
you know all things,

Who then of those were the chief men and
lords of the Danaans?

I could not tell over the multitude of them
nor name them,

not if I had ten tongues and ten mouths,
nor if I had

a voice never to be broken and a heart of
bronze within me,

not unless the Muses of Olympia, daughters
of Zeus of the aegis, remembered all those
who came beneath Ilion.

I will tell the lords of the ships, and
the ships numbers. (ll. 484-493)

The Homeric poet acknowledges the gift of memory from

the gods without which mortal beings would have no means of establishing their identity or recalling events which have brought glory to them. If the poet were not given the ability to recall the names of the warriors and their accomplishments, the mortal world would become undifferentiated and, therefore, meaningless. In honoring the Muses, the classical poet also establishes his or her own position as a divinely-inspired teller of the history of the nation. As in the older mythic and ritualistic traditions, no distinction is made between historical fact and creative fiction. Whatever the poet relates is the truth. Because the poet has been inspired by the gods, the listeners accept the poet's words as a truthful rendering of their existence.

To return to the opening line of The Iliad, in addition to establishing the poet's relationship to the gods, it encapsulizes the theme of the epic: Achilles' wrath and the subsequent devastation it brings to both the Trojans and the Danaans. As noted earlier, the story of the Trojan War was well known to the Homeric poet's audience, thus allowing the poet to shape this version of the narrative in support of a specific purpose. In this instance, it was to be a commentary on the sorrow that war brings to all the individuals which

it touches. The metapoetic voice is didactic to the extent that it seeks to create an awareness of the folly of war; yet it readily acknowledges that the sorrow of war is an implicit part of human life.

The importance of the mnemonic gift which the gods have bestowed on the poet is emphasized again in Book VI of The Iliad when Helen comments that her love for Alexandros (Paris) was instigated by Zeus "so that hereafter we shall be made into things of song for the men of the future" (357-358). Her statement reinforces the poet's claims for both the thematic importance and the veracity of this epic. These events have been brought about by the gods as a means of instructing future generations, through the medium of the singer of tales, about the nature of mortal life. Thus, the poet's tale is of the highest import because it imparts divine wisdom.

The Homeric poet also takes the opportunity to create a portrait of the artist at work in the description of Hephaistos' crafting of a new shield for Achilles to carry into battle: "On it he wrought in all their beauty two cities of mortal men" (XVIII.490-491). The scenes depict in great detail the marriages, festivals and golden raiment of the peaceful city and the

devastating battle and treachery of the city of war. The elaborate shield is, of course, emblematic of the epic poet's own handiwork. Although primarily concerned with depicting the "city of war" in The Iliad, the Homeric poet reminds us in this meta-episode that the inspired artist may also relate exquisite tales concerning the city of peace and, further, that the very artistry employed in the telling, as exemplified by Hephaistos' skill in fashioning the battle shield, may turn the implements of war into something of great value, that is to say, a work of art.

The philosophical movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought about a change in thinking concerning the nature of art. This is not to suggest that some of these philosophical attitudes were not emerging as early as the Renaissance, but this period, and particularly the work of Wordsworth, epitomizes the changes as they occurred in the verse epic. No longer inspired by the gods of classical epic, the poet of the Romantic age commands his or her own voice to come forth. At the opening of Wordsworth's The Prelude, the speaker welcomes Nature as his friend and guide: "Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze" (375). The hierarchical control of the universe

by a pantheon of gods gives way to the idea of Nature as tangible evidence of the animated spirit of God in the universe. Though no longer at the mercy of the vengeful gods of Greece and Rome, mortals have concomitantly lost their sense of place in the hierarchy of being and must rely upon their own ability to attain a higher spiritual reality: "the Poet hence may boldly take his way among mankind/Wherever Nature leads" (12.294-296) to comprehend "the great system of the world/Where Man is sphered, and which God animates" (13.267-268).

The search of the individual soul for reunion with the spiritual power of the universe becomes the central concern of the poet and that yearning is suffused throughout the metapoetic fabric of the epic. Art becomes a vehicle for self-fulfillment in a world where the traditional relationship of mortals to gods has broken down. In Wordsworth's reconception of the poetic task, the poet-searcher must embrace Nature, via the imagination, as the means of establishing a sense of being-in-the-world:

A balance, an ennobling interchange
Of action from within and from without:
The excellence, pure spirit, and best power
Both of object seen, and eye that sees.

(12.376-379)

The poem, as a record of achievement of the "clearest insight," i.e., that of the poet, is meant to be a source of continued encouragement to other human beings in their quest for meaning. While Wordsworth conceives of that achievement within the construct of his poem as selected moments of enlightenment, or "spots of time," the poetry, as a work of art, is able to maintain the spiritual energy of communion indefinitely. Thus, at the metapoetic level, the statement which the poem makes is one of enduring achievement. Though the poet's own mortality will prevent endless re-creation of the imaginative spiritual merging with the universe, the poem carries latent within it the potential for other individuals to re-create that union.

Although Whitman, too, believes in the enduring nature of the work of art, he creates a sense of endless achievement within the poem as well as at the metapoetic level: "There is no stoppage and can never be stoppageI tramp a perpetual journey...." ("Song" 81-82). These direct statements of the speaker are reinforced by such elements of poetic diction as repetition and the use of participial phrases, which were discussed in the previous section, to build a sense of the poem as a

ceaseless act of coming-into-being. The reader is reminded of the classical poet's conception of the poem as the means by which the mortal world takes its shape; yet Whitman looks to his own inner muse as the instigator for that shape and insists that the reader follow suit: "Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,/You must travel it for yourself./It is not farit is within reach,/Perhaps you have been on it since you were born, and did not know" ("Song" 82). Like Wordsworth's speaker, the poet-persona of "Song of Myself," and the entire Leaves of Grass, has the clearer insight, but in Whitman's epic the speaker refuses to proceed alone. The poet insists on breaking down the formal barrier between artist and reader by causing the reader to move in tandem with the artist on the journey toward personal fulfillment: "what I assume, you shall assume." The poet phrases the statement paratactically so that it will speak of a concurrent relationship rather than a sequential, or hierarchical, one.

In Whitman's epic, we also see a notable shift from the earlier epic in the conceptual relationship of art to nature. For Wordsworth and the other Romantic poets, both Nature and the individual were spiritually

empowered and the artist's goal was to find "a balance, an ennobling interchange" of the two. However, Whitman envisions Nature as the raw material which human knowledge is capable of transforming: "The poet incarnates the geography" (Preface 7). It is the human being, as Adamic namer, who infuses Nature with its meaning:

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy
 whatever I touch or am touched from;
 The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer
 than prayer,
 This head is more than churches or bibles
 or creeds. ("Song" 51)

There can be no greater collapsing of the priestly and poetic with the common vision of life than in this declaration of human control. Whitman, in general, is confident that the written word, no matter how prosaic, can be transformed into inspired language in the act of creating the poem. Furthermore, art not only articulates human existence; to his mind, it consecrates the act of living.

The very act of living is itself a spiritual pursuit, whether the individual is conscious of that fact, as the poet is, or not ("Perhaps you have been on [the journey] since you were born, and did not know").

Even the poet's lapses into less-than-perfect consciousness have been allowed for within the scheme of the Whitmanian epic: "Do I contradict myself?/Very well then....I contradict myself;/I am large....I contain multitudes" ("Song" 87). The poem is all-inclusive, even in its moments of imperfection; it cannot be any less than divine for all its flaws. In this manner, Whitman conflates the act of being with the act of artistic creation to make mortal life the greatest poem.

The poet does not fear the loss of either the god-like muse who governs classical poetry or the fleeting nature of Romantic inspiration. The metapoetic posture in Leaves of Grass is one which exudes confidence in the inherent spirituality of human existence. In Whitman's epic, we find the poet as the continuing, yet assured, questor in a New World full of possibilities. Though concerned with the materialistic outlook of the United States in his time, Whitman continued to believe that America would eventually become a fully-realized, "spiritual" democracy. However, Whitman's optimism, and the conceptual framework for the epic which it inspired, could not survive the philosophical upheaval of the late nineteenth century. The Modernist poets would be called upon to revolutionize

the form of the epic once again in an attempt to meet the demands of a new age.

Notes

¹ The Sword from the Rock (London: Faber and Faber, 1953); see also C.M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (London, Macmillan, 1952) and Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton UP, 1957) for arguments concerning the derivation of epic poetry from shamanistic ritual and from myth, respectively.

² All quotations from The Iliad are from The Iliad of Homer, Richard Lattimore, trans. (U of Chicago P, 1951).

³ See, for example, "Simon Lee, The Old Huntsman" (85-88): "O reader! had you in your mind/Such stores as silent thought can bring,/O gentle reader!/you would find/A tale in every thing" (ll. 73-76).

⁴ All references to Whitman's prose and poetry are from Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry and Collected Prose (NY: The Library of America, 1982). Quoted works will be cited parenthetically as follows: "Song of Myself" as "Song"; Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass as Preface; "Democratic Vistas" as "D. Vistas"; and "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" as "A Backward Glance."

Of course, it is arguable that Wordsworth's "common" poetic diction is no less an artifice than the "elevated" style of earlier epic.

CHAPTER III

HART CRANE'S THE BRIDGE

"The American imagination has been a synthesizing one, giving the artist the freedom to use any available material, creed or influence to create new harmonies."

--Helge N. Nilsen

The Modern Dilemma

(i)

The world that Hart Crane, and Whitman's other poetic successors, inherited was greatly changed from the one in which Whitman had written his epic of the New World. The shift in consciousness which occurred during the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries culminated in a threat to that basic human need: the ability to sustain belief. As David Hollinger remarks:

scientific intellectuals, as well as
Bloomsbury aesthetes, sometimes recognized that knowledge of the external world was not so easy to come by, that contra-

dictions persisted in human experience, that a real price was paid for the benefits of bureaucratic rationality, that a large measure of uncertainty was an enduring condition of life, that human beings had a propensity to act irrationally, that it was difficult to find an unchanging standard. For moral judgments, that God might be dead, and that many sensitive individuals felt alienated from industrial society. Such recognitions are the stuff out of which most formulations of 'the modern predicament' are made. (38)

This "predicament" was an unprecedented one in the western world; for the first time an older way of understanding the universe was not being displaced by a more suitable one. Rather, there was a growing realization that the world could no longer be understood by any reformulation of the older presumptions. The workings of reality appeared to be too unstable, and perhaps even too irrational, to support a systematic analysis using the previously-established terms of philosophical inquiry.

However alarming modern consciousness might

seem, the aesthetic mode was well-suited to the exploration of the multiple, overlapping and even contradictory ideas concerning the nature of reality. For the most part, the history of art had consisted of an array of imaginative articulations regarding life, none of which claimed to be the complete or final statement of human existence. Yet earlier artists, including the writers of epic poetry, had had the benefit of a shared world-view as the basis for their work. The epic poets of the modern era were faced with the disintegration of the concepts which had shaped the occidental understanding of the world since the time of Homer. As Allen Tate noted in his Foreward to Hart Crane's White Buildings, published in 1926:

The important contemporary poet has the rapidly diminishing privilege of reorganizing the subjects of the past. He must construct and assimilate his own subjects.

(xiii)

The conceptual framework by which the world had been understood was being rapidly dismantled and it fell to the Modernist generation to decide what was to take its place.

Perhaps the most influential poetic work that

emerged in response to this dilemma was T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922). In this poem, Eliot measured contemporary life against the past and found modern civilization not only to be in a state of decay but, more seriously, lacking the prospect of renewal. The poem was a tour de force of formal learning which made its point seem all the more irrefutable. Interweaving a stream of myths and literary allusions, Eliot seemed to invoke in The Waste Land the collective wisdom of centuries of eastern and western thought as the basis for his judgment of modern times. As Malcolm Cowley explains in Exile's Return:

When The Waste Land first appeared, we were confronted with a dilemma....At heart--not intellectually, but in a purely emotional fashion--we didn't like it. We didn't agree with what we regarded as the principal idea that the poem set forth. The idea was a simple one. Beneath the rich symbolism of The Waste Land, the wide learning expressed in seven languages, the actions conducted on three planes, the musical episodes, the geometrical structure--beneath and by means of

all this, we felt the poet was saying that the present is inferior to the past. The past was dignified; the present is barren of emotion. The past was a landscape nourished by living fountains; now the fountains of spiritual grace are dry....

[Eliot] not only abused the present but robbed it of vitality. (112-113)

Eliot was to maintain his position as a pre-eminent critic-writer well into the middle of the twentieth century with The Waste Land as his brilliant, initial pronouncement concerning the condition of the modern world.¹ Any number of writers shared Cowley's view on the radical nature of Eliot's assault on contemporary society, and the work of such poets as Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens was directly affected by, and written at least partially in response to, Eliot's expressed view.²

For the poets of Eliot's generation, the most damaging implication of his work was its emphasis on the futility of art as a potential medium for spiritual regeneration. In The Waste Land Eliot builds an overwhelming image of a stagnant environment which precludes the modern artist from generating the myths,

or "supreme fictions" as Wallace Stevens termed them, necessary to satisfy the needs of the human spirit in contemporary times. As Donald Pease remarks:

In The Waste Land the poet's power to organize the fragments into a rationale for an epic had come into question....[The poem] evokes a sense of radical and insuperable disintegration, which does not threaten to end in an apocalyptic vision so much as never to end at all....[Eliot] makes the reader feel the desire for a unifying vision but then demonstrates rather convincingly that no mere poem can satisfy this desire. (260-261)

To restate Eliot's argument in terms of the three major elements of this study, we find him, first, postulating an historically regressive heroic model. The hero, to Eliot's mind, must be a willing supplicant to God in order to achieve a harmonic relationship with the universe and not an Adamic namer and creator of the sort proposed by Whitman in his Leaves of Grass. Further, the poet, like the cathedral builders of the Middle Ages, becomes the anonymous glorifier of a God who unilaterally initiates all creative activity. As

Pease comments, "Eliot returned man to the status of creature not creator and the poet to the position of impersonal craftsman..." (261).

Regarding the language of poetry, Eliot believed it was not merely downtrodden but defunct. In The Waste Land, Eliot explores what he finds in the modern era to be an almost total dissociation of poetic sensibility. Characterized in his 1921 essay, "The Metaphysical Poets," as a breakdown in the capability of language due to the estrangement of poetic feeling from poetic thought, Eliot's larger idea of dissociation might be figured in terms of a divorce of human language from the godhead. For Eliot, the language of poetry had been set adrift and, along with the modern individual, had lost its vital connection to the original source of power in the universe. The best course would be a return to the richly-symbolic language and established liturgical tradition of the Anglo-Catholic church.³

In keeping with this belief, Eliot's metapoetic voice was one which counselled the need to rise above the contemporary circumstance of an utterly debased world to recapture what was sacred via the ritual and pageantry of religion. His point of view in The Waste Land is a diachronic one in which he measures a chaotic

present against a glorious past, or "golden age," and declares theodicy, rather than poetry, to be the means by which the spiritual ideal might be recovered.

However, Eliot's contemporaries did not abandon poetry; and, from their essays and letters, it appears that Eliot's brilliant and forceful attack spurred their search for a poetics which would respond to the needs of their time. In a statement which expresses the attitude of those who did not choose to follow Eliot into what they perceived as a retreat from art, William James comments in The Will to Believe:

All that the human heart wants is its chance. It will willingly forego certainty in universal matters if only it can be allowed to feel that in them it has that same inalienable right to run risk....

(109-110)

The Modernist poets granted Eliot's characterization of contemporary life as chaotic, yet they chose to assume the risk that poetry could produce an imaginative construct which would provide a new basis for belief during what Hart Crane called "a period that is loose at all ends, without apparent direction of any sort"

Letters 110).⁴ Modernists such as Crane and Williams

looked to an earlier era for an artistic model and found in Walt Whitman's poetry an appropriate foundation for their poetry.

Although both Crane and Williams were for many reasons critical of Whitman's work, they readily granted that it constituted a rough beginning toward a fully-realized American poetry. Of particular interest was Whitman's belief in the vitality inherent in the mundane world. In formulating their own response to Eliot, these poets followed Whitman in turning their attention toward the "local" elements of life, as Williams called them. Rather than rising above the debased earthly world as Eliot was suggesting, these poets hoped to discover within ordinary objects and daily occurrences the rejuvenating spark of spiritual life. There was no need to fashion a comparative vision, as Eliot had, which held the present up to some artificial notion of a glorious past. The posture of the new poetry would be a synchronic one, as it had been in Whitman's work; it would focus on the here and now, in all its complexity. As J. Hillis Miller explains in Poets of Reality:

There can be for many writers no return to the traditional conception of God as the highest existence, creator of all other

existences, transcending his creation as well as dwelling within it. If there is to be a God in the new world it must be a presence within things and not beyond them. The new poets have at the farthest limit of their experience caught a glimpse of a fugitive presence, something shared by all things in the fact that they are....The most familiar object, in coming into the light, reveals being, and poetry brings being into the open by naming things as they are, in their glistening immediacy.

(10)

It would be the task of the Modernists to examine familiar objects, much as Whitman had done, but under significantly altered circumstances as they did not share Whitman's confidence that such efforts would be successful. Yet they would explore their new imaginative territory--no matter how chaotic and threatening it seemed or how little hope of unity and wholeness it appeared to offer--rather than accept Eliot's judgment. As Daniel J. Singal explains, Modernism is characterized by the desire to know "'reality,' in all its depth and complexity," no matter how painful that knowledge

might be. And, in choosing to explore that reality, Modernism "offers a demanding, and at times even heroic, vision of life" (16).

(ii)

Hart Crane (1899-1932) was greatly concerned with Eliot's vision as expressed in The Waste Land. He remarked in a letter to Gorham Munson:

Certainly the man has dug the ground
and buried hope as deep and direfully
as it can ever be done....All I know...is
that it interests me to still affirm
certain things. (Letters 115)

Yet Crane understood Eliot's indictment as something which must be met and answered and he readily acknowledged, in the early 1920s, that his own work had "been more influenced by Eliot than any other modern" (Letters 114). Though Crane believed Eliot's judgment to be in error, he nevertheless gave Eliot credit for influencing the course of modern poetry by taking the modern predicament as the central subject of his work. Crane wrote to Allen Tate that "in his own realm Eliot presents us with an absolute impasse, yet oddly enough, he can be utilized to lead us to, intelligently point to, other positions and 'pastures new'" (Letters

90). Thus Crane's attitude toward Eliot's work was much more complex than the simple denouncement which his early critics made it out to be.⁵

In fact, Crane, who had only a high school education, became a dedicated student of the work of his contemporaries, especially that of Eliot and William Carlos Williams. It was Eliot's work which provided the model for the formal strategy which Crane devised for his epic. Regarding Eliot's influence on the structure of Crane's epic poem, The Bridge (1930), Sister Bernetta Quinn notes:

In technique Hart Crane's The Bridge resembles quite closely The Waste Land, with eight instead of five sections connected by imagery and rhythms which result in free association, or what has been termed progression by a logic of feeling. Both find their anchoring symbol in placeBoth, too, combine passages in the fashion of montages; in fact, Crane uses the film as one of the ways of expressing his vision in the 'Proem' to The Bridge (147)

The lines to which Quinn refers in her last statement

constitute the third stanza of the "Proem":

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
 With multitudes bent toward some flashing
 scene
 Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
 Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;
 (45)s

This stanza calls to mind a passage from Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

It is impossible to say just what I mean!
 But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves
 in patterns on a screen (Collected
Poems: 1909-1962 6)

In fact, the relationship between these two verses is illustrative of the many instances in which Crane fixes upon the work of another writer with the idea of re-working the material either to extend its meaning or, as in this case, to "intelligently point to new positions." Where Eliot's image of patterns on a screen indicates the impossibility of his protagonist, Prufrock, communicating with the woman he desires ("That is not what I meant at all/That is not it, at all"), Crane uses the screen in his epic as the symbolic means by which the poet can offer "panoramic sleights," or

artistic presentations, of language and image to entice the screen gazers into sharing his poetic vision.

Crane is not frustrated, as is Prufrock, at being unable "to say just what I mean," for he purposely chooses to make oblique or incomplete statements with the goal of unlocking the associative power of the ideas he presents. Further along in the "Proem," the speaker remarks concerning the bridge, "Only in darkness is thy shadow clear" (46). For Crane, presenting a shadow or suggestion, rather than the precise or completed image, is the means by which the imaginative capability of the readers might be unleashed.

In the "Cape Hatteras" section of The Bridge Crane refers to Eliot's work to make clear his refutation of Eliot's judgment against society. The poet-persona invokes the spirit of Walt Whitman here to aid in the resurrection of human insight to a level where it can "glimpse what joys or pain/Our eyes can share or answer" (88). For what Crane takes to be essential to Whitman's outlook, and lacking in Eliot's, is the notion of a mortal world constituted not solely of the experiencing of pain but also of a corresponding sense of joy.

In fact, while the critical literature has long

appraised Crane's epic in light of its ability--or failure--to achieve an ecstatic vision, The Bridge should be discussed in terms of its endless movement between the poles of joy and pain, of hope and despair; for these are the terms which shape the meaning of the poem.⁷ As Crane noted in an early letter to his father, "There is only one harmony, that is the equilibrium maintained by two opposite forces, equally strong" (Letters 5). Crane would continue to believe throughout his career in the aesthetic possibilities which a dialectal poetry offered and that a new formal strategy could be achieved even in the face of Eliot's strong denial. As Donald Pease explains regarding Crane's technique:

Crane increased the distance between the actual and the possible, the desire and its object, until only the span of longing between them remains, and this longing itself generates a world. (271)

After making known his choice of Whitman's conception of mortal life, Crane responds to the charge which Eliot makes in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" that those who hope to build a new and sustaining faith based on human endeavor do so in vain. In the

closing line of "Prufrock," such dreamers meet their end when "human voices wake us, and we drown." In the third stanza of "Cape Hatteras," the poetic persona declares:

Dream cancels dream in this new realm of
fact
From which we wake into the dream of act
(89).

Eliot's fruitless dreamer becomes in Crane's scenario the master of the modern age of technological "fact," whose dreaming is not a negative act of escape, as Eliot images it, but a state which prepares the individual to engage in meaningful action. Denouncing Eliot's vision of mortals having lost their ability to act with purpose, Crane announces that he has reclaimed Whitman's vision regarding the future of America. The poet then moves hand-in-hand with his mentor, "onward without halt." In its completed form, The Bridge exhibits the care which Crane took, not to reject Eliot's work, but to rework what he viewed as the product of Eliot's flawed genius, much as Blake sought to "correct" what he found to be in error in Milton.

The early work of William Carlos Williams, especially "The Wanderer: A Rococco Study" (1914), also

strongly influenced the shape which Crane's epic was to take.⁸ In "The Wanderer," Williams' speaker asks "How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?", thus posing what may have been the central question for all the epic poets of this era, that is, what formal strategy might the artist employ which will accurately reflect the modern state of consciousness?

With a nod to Whitman, Williams' protagonist "crosses the ferry" to Manhattan and initiates the quest for an answer. Ultimately, this central figure comes to realize that it is the journey experience itself which may provide a response to the question, as it had for Whitman; and the speaker then counsels others to "waken...to the waving grass of your minds!" (8). Thus Whitman's belief in the primacy of exploring America's "leaves of grass," its physical and spiritual terrain, retains its metaphorical power for Williams as he strives to meet the demands of his own age.

As Williams structures it in "The Wanderer," the journey-quest has several distinctive features which were to be more fully elaborated in The Bridge and Williams' own epic, Paterson. One of these features, mentioned earlier, was a commitment to carrying on the task which Whitman had begun, of "tallying" America as

the means of identifying what was essential to the American character. Williams concentrated on what was "thoroughly local in origin," because it would have "some chance of being universal in application," as he noted in his essay on Edgar Allan Poe in In the American Grain.⁹

For Crane, this task would bring him to focus on two particular aspects of American life: an understanding of the native American Indians and their close attachment to the land and, second, the potential for assimilating the rapidly-growing body of scientific and technological knowledge available in the twentieth century.¹⁰ Through his poetic synthesis, Crane hoped to offer an avenue by which his readers might understand the American experience, both in terms of what it meant to be an individual as well as a member of the aggregate society. As Alan Trachtenberg notes, Crane hoped in The Bridge to create a poem that

would perform his 'essential architecture' doubly or trebly: it would reconnect the American present to the American past in a new, 'vital' way; it would reconnect the poet to his personal experience; and it would, by the fusion of these two goals,

build a bridge between the poet and his
people; between poetry as such and
'America.' ("Cultural Revisions..." 78)

Another feature of "The Wanderer," which both Crane and Williams carried forward into their epics, is an understanding of the journey-quest as a neverending process. This idea also originated with Whitman, who linguistically structured Leaves of Grass to emulate the endless coming-into-being which he understood to be the fundamental principle of mortal life. As for the poetic persona, Charles Feidelson notes:

The ego appears in the poems as a
traveler and explorer, not as a
static observer. The shift of image
from the contemplative eye of 'estab-
lished poems' to the voyaging ego of
Whitman's poetry records a large-scale
theoretical shift from the categories
of 'substance' to those of 'process.'

(17)

Whitman further apprehended his own craft as a continuing and accretive process of realization, rather than simply the putting together of a collection of discrete "artifacts," or poems. In keeping with this

view, Williams commits the protagonist in his early poem to "the new wandering" in response to the challenge of "mirroring" the modern circumstance. He is suggesting here that poets of the modern era must commit themselves to a continuous inquiry, based on the acknowledgment of change as a focal principle of existence, and, further, to the need to create a work of art which responds to that knowledge in that it is no longer constructed as a fixed object. Hart Crane remarks in his essay "Modern Poetry" that poetry is

an architectural art, based not on
Evolution or the idea of progress, but
on the articulation of the contemporary
human consciousness sub specie
aeternitatis, and inclusive of all
readjustments incident to science and other
shifting factors related to that con-
sciousness. (260)

In construing the aesthetic task to be a process of inquiry without committing to the impossible goal of providing an ultimate answer, or "cure-all," the Modernists had begun to articulate a framework for the new poetry.¹¹ As Crane announced in the epigraph to The Bridge, the contemporary poet-questors would best

learn "From going to and fro in the earth/and from walking up and down in it" how to respond to the needs of their times.

The Heroic Ideal in "The Bridge"

The manner in which Crane formulated his heroic model is illustrative of the complexity of The Bridge as a whole and accounts in part for the reputation which The Bridge has among the critics as a "difficult" work. Crane composed his epic by means of what he called the "superior logic of metaphor" which entailed the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate elements for the purpose of generating a series of associated ideas in the reader's mind (Letters 138). As Crane explains in "General Aims and Theories":

the motivation of the poem must be derived from the implicit emotional dynamics of the materials used, and the terms of expression employed are often selected less for their logical (literal) significance than for their associational meanings. Via this and their metaphorical inter-relationships, the entire construction of the poem is raised on the organic

principle of a 'logic of metaphor,' which antedates our so-called pure logic, and which is the genetic basis of all speech, hence consciousness and thought-extension.

(221)

With this commitment to composing an epic as a series of "metaphorical inter-relationships," Crane saw no need to retain the conventional hero of earlier epic and moved instead to an heroic model which would correspond to contemporary consciousness. Thus the poet discarded the central heroic figure in favor of an array of heroes as well as the presentation of unembodied ideas, all of which would guide the reader toward an understanding of what was required of a hero in the modern era. The most visible of the questor figures in The Bridge are Columbus, Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe; yet equally significant are the poetic persona and the reader of the poem. If the work succeeded in its epic task, the poet, via his persona, would make the reader an integral part of the heroic model.

The poetic persona opens the epic with the initial query, "How many dawns...the seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him [?]," and that speaker's subsequent ruminations lead us on an introspective

journey toward "Atlantis." The quest is conducted, for the most part, at the pre-conscious level where the "logic of metaphor" is the mode of comprehension. It proceeds "through darkness" because that is the realm in which the imagination is able to set free its truth. When the quest is completed successfully, the bridge will realize its symbolic potential to "lend a myth to God," as the poet prays it will in "The Proem"; that is, it will be able to repair the fabric of belief in modern times.

In "Ave Maria," the second section of The Bridge, Crane presents Christopher Columbus as the first of his exemplary hero figures. With Whitman's work as the inspiration for his own portrayal of Columbus, Crane envisions the pinnacle of the great explorer's achievement, not as the moment of his discovery of the new continent, but as the moment of comprehending America as a realm of infinite possibility, i.e., as "Cathay." Columbus must survive the return journey across the Atlantic, the "third world" which "tests the word," for the New World will hold no meaning until the word is made known to the "partisans of the quest," as the poet calls them in his marginal gloss note. Thus the goal of Columbus' journey is not

simply discovery but bringing home the knowledge he has gained; and the explorer's journey becomes a symbolic rehearsal of the quest of the American poet to bring America "home" to the readers of the poem. Crane perceives this task to be a difficult one. In The Bridge, Crane portrays Columbus warning his patron, King Ferdinand, to avoid lusting for the "delirium of jewels" which will cause the New World to be reduced to a material possession. This speech reflects the poet's own concern that his readers have come to perceive the land in such a way that they will not be receptive to the deeper, more spiritual meaning it holds.

In "Powhatan's Daughter," Crane enlarges his theme of America's symbolic potential by making a second retrogressive journey into its past. The "Van Winkle" and "The River" sections present a montage of memories, including flashes into the historical past, the past as it has been handed down through folk narrative and the legendary past of the American Indians.

It is this latter conceptualization of the past, with its focus on the body of Indian lore, on which Crane chooses to dwell. In "The Dance" subsection, the poetic speaker is transported back to the time when the Indians freely populated the North American continent.

Their "tribal morn," to which the speaker asks Maquo-keeta to "dance us back," commemorates that period of history when the Indians had an intimate understanding of the land. Unlike the European immigrants, these Native Americans developed a fully-articulated relationship to the natural world which they knew as the source of their material--and spiritual--sustenance. The Indians consecrated their relationship with nature through ritualistic celebration, and the poetic speaker takes part in that celebration by joining Maquo-keeta in his dance. In this manner, the poetic persona is able to bring us into renewed contact with the land and thus the poet symbolically recovers the "usable past," as Van Wyck Brooks termed it.

However, Crane is suggesting in "Powhatan's Daughter" that we have the ability to recover more than just this one aspect of America's heritage. The fragmented references to folk tales, other literary sources and incidents from individual and collective histories point to the numerous ways in which we may comprehend our Americanness. And while the Maquo-keeta episode is indicative of an instinctual relationship which has been formed with the natural world. The Bridge also con-

tains instances in which Crane's heroes undertake a conscious and thoughtful engagement with the land. By constructing the poem around a series of associated metaphors, rather than a single heroic figure, it was Crane's hope that the reader might gain a multi-faceted sense of America, one that is instinctive as well as more deliberate and conscious.

Having conflated the present and the past in "Powhatan's Daughter" for the purpose of rediscovering our fundamental relationship to the land, Crane explores the dimensions of time in "Cutty Sark" in terms of the finite versus the infinite. Crane noted in a letter to his benefactor, Otto Kahn, that "Cutty Sark" is a fugue of "two 'voices'--that of the world of Time and that of the world of Eternity..." (Letters 307). This section interweaves snippets of an old sailor's travelogue with a listing of the names of the clipper ships, both reminders of the cataloguing in earlier epics, with the tune from the nickel-in-the-slot piano, which is the contrapuntal voice of Eternity against which these time-bound specifics are related. Crane fluctuates between the finite and the infinite in these fragments until they become bound to one another, as figure is to

ground. We are being reminded by the poet in this section of the poem that the momentary and the immortal have an intimate relationship, that one cannot exist without the other.

Having made us conscious of the function of time in the poem and having illustrated the construction of a usable past, Crane once again brings the Brooklyn Bridge to the foreground of the poem to signal the fact that we have reached the central point of the epic. Now the poet's task is to move the reader, with the assistance of his poetic guide, across the remainder of the span toward an imaginative understanding of how the past might be employed in aid of the present.¹²

To this purpose, Crane introduces in "Cape Hatteras" the figure of Walt Whitman, who, like Columbus, is an enlightened voyageur, an individual able to envision America "bright with myth." However, the poet-persona wonders if Whitman's dream of a spiritual democracy remains feasible in modern-day America:

Walt, tell me, Walt Whitman, if infinity
Be still the same as when you walked the
beach

Near Paumonok (89)

Crane appears to be wrestling here with the prospect of realizing America's potential in such chaotic times. He had written to Waldo Frank in 1926:

If only America were half as worthy today to be spoken of as Whitman spoke of it fifty years ago there might be something for me to say--not that Whitman required any tangible proof of his intimations, but that time has shown how increasingly lonely and ineffectual his confidence stands. (Letters 261-262)

Crane is not so much concerned in his letter to Waldo Frank with America-as-terrain as he is with the "worthiness," i.e., readiness, of the American people to commit to a search for an enabling myth. Crane's commitment to the quest is evident in the very composition of his epic; therefore his seeming lack of conviction in his address to Walt Whitman in "Cape Hatteras" should be construed as a questioning of the readers of the epic rather than himself or his mentor poet. Crane wishes the readers to ask themselves if they have the necessary confidence to be epic questors in these difficult times. As Philip Horton explains, "Crane intended [his] poems

not as descriptions that could be read about, but as immediate experiences that the reader could have... (178).

The poet reveals his own confidence throughout the remainder of the "Cape Hatteras" section. Although the speaker goes on to warn against the misuse of the new technology ("the gigantic power house"), as Columbus has similarly warned against the material plundering of the New World, the poetic persona expresses confidence that America will prove to be the sufficient foundation for a resurrection of the human spirit. "The competent loam, the probable grass" remain as substantial as they were in Whitman's time, and the speaker finds himself renewed, through his fraternal bond with Whitman, and therefore able to attack the problematic "Years of the Modern."

It is in the "Cape Hatteras" section, this "ode" to Whitman as the poet once called it, that Crane's epic appears to reach its zenith of hope. The poetic persona joins hands with Whitman in a triumphant moment of renewed vision and the bridge is metamorphosed into "the rainbow's arch." Had the poem ended here, Allen Tate would have been correct in viewing The Bridge as the last gasp of a dying Romantic tradition.¹³ However, the

last stanza of "Cape Hatteras" clearly indicates Crane's intention to work in a new style. The end of the section is punctuated with a hyphen which, functioning as a means of enjambment, moves the poem beyond the anticipated point of closure that is in keeping with an older, Romantic style.

Tate's criticism notwithstanding, it was Crane's belief that a moment of ecstatic vision could no longer serve as the closing statement of epic; that, in fact, simple closure of the poem was itself no longer feasible. The modern era demanded a poetic strategy which complemented its disjunctive nature and to address that need, Crane took the poem toward a more complex moment of realization. Having developed in the first five sections of the epic the finer, more positive "strands" of the "Myth of America," Crane proceeded in the next three sections to present the darker aspects which, to his mind, were essential to this new vision.¹⁴

"Three Songs" takes as its focus the debasement of the female principle. Pocahontas, the Mother Earth symbol, with whom the poetic persona is able to attain a correct relationship, is placed in opposition to Eve, Magdalene and Mary, the "nameless" and "homeless" women

toward whom the poetic persona has only unfulfilled desire. The speaker's earlier symbolic marriage to the land now becomes a "burlesque of our lust." "Quaker Hill" continues the theme of debasement with the "Promised Land" becoming a transient leasehold that is hawked by the "persuasive suburban land agent." "Three Songs" and "Quaker Hill" do not have the weight and complexity of other sections of The Bridge. However, they indicate by their inclusion in the poem the significance that the darker side of life held in Crane's poetic scheme, and which he was able to articulate more fully in the next section, entitled "The Tunnel."¹⁵

In "The Tunnel," Crane parodies Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as he produces his final renunciation of Eliot's vision of the waste land. Employing second-person, command-form verbs to echo Eliot's style in "Prufrock," Crane guides the reader below the surface of modern-day Manhattan, the epitome of Eliot's vision of contemporary society, and into the subway tunnel. In this modern descent into hell, Crane brings the reader into contact with debased love ("and love/A burnt match skating in a urinal") and corrupt language ("Why didja/Swing on it/anyhow--"). In sum,

Crane acknowledges that the mortal world is not Eden:

"You'll find the garden in the third act dead."

Yet Crane is alluding to--and transfiguring--Eliot's own images here, specifically his symbolic use of fire. The third section of The Waste Land, entitled "The Fire Sermon," concludes: "O Lord thou pluckest me out....burning." For Crane, the "Hand of Fire" has been a symbol of God's power throughout The Bridge, and "The Tunnel" closes with: "Thou gatherest,/O Hand of Fire/gatherest--". Making careful changes, Crane reworks Eliot's fire image from one which portrays the human being prostrated before an angry God into one which depicts God as gathering in and protecting mortal beings with this wonderful Hand of Fire. Crane prepares the reader for his transformation of Eliot's symbolism by presenting the "ash heap," in the earlier "Van Winkle" section, as the site upon which the "unsuspecting fibre" is renewed, or made "clean as fire." Out of the ashy decay of civilization, Crane believes, will rise the saving remnant of human society.

Poe is Crane's heroic figure in "The Tunnel" and is portrayed, in contrast to Whitman, as the short-lived, obsessive poet-questor whose work, nevertheless, survives his doomed mortality. In this section, Crane

leads the reader onto the subway car where Poe is situated, literally and figuratively, at the lowest point in the poem. He is strategically placed at the nadir of a subterranean arc, which mirrors the vaulting arch of the Brooklyn Bridge, and in direct opposition to Whitman, who stands at the zenith of the poem.

"The Tunnel," along with "Three Songs" and "Quaker Hill," explicates the second, and dialectal, portion of Crane's heroic model; for there can be no "true" poetic vision which does not encompass the dark side of life. Crane believes this negative, but essential, component of the model is one pole of an endlessly fluctuating scheme of life. Poe, as its primary representative, has the ability to rise "like Lazarus." Crane assures us that the "Word...will not die...!!" To reinforce the importance of this idea, Crane tells us that after the poetic persona emerges from the tunnel, that figure moves toward "Tomorrow,/And to be".

The goal of the epic through these first eight sections of the poem consists of moving the reader along the "curveship" of the bridge and its inverse arc, the subway tunnel, which comprise a completed circle of

human experience. The final section of the poem, "Atlantis," serves as the coda to the poem by presenting its themes in an integrated and amplified form.

Unfortunately, Crane's exclamatory tone in this final section has been mistaken by some critics as an indication that "Atlantis" represents the triumph of the positive over the negative forces in life. But, as Lawrence Dembo notes, "Despite its hymnal form, the poem is not the declamation of a dream realized..." (130). The tone signals only the poet's achievement of a comprehensive vision of modern reality--certainly an accomplishment worthy of jubilation--and not an ecstatic vision of Eden regained.

Furthermore, while Crane's poem is comprehensive in its portrayal of the darker as well as the brighter aspects of life, it is not complete. Crane purposely leaves us in the final stanza of "Atlantis" with an ambiguous montage of phrases and images to ponder. By constructing the ending to The Bridge in this manner, Crane consciously refused to provide the reader with a completed poem, much less with a completed model of the epic hero. That is to say, the hero, and the larger epic, cannot be understood simply by reflecting on the associated ideas or collection of heroic exemplars Crane

has presented throughout the poem; it is necessary for the reader to take the poem further, to move beyond the material in the text, in order to complete the epic.

Therein lies the essence of Crane's poetic response to the modern dilemma: the primary purpose of his epic is not to provide an answer, but, rather, to provide a formal strategy which the reader might use to deal with the "welter of actuality." And in coming to some understanding of reality through the employment of the poem as a strategy, the reader completes the bridge and becomes the hero who redeems the present day. As Bernice Slote remarks, "The reader participates in [the poem's] psychological movement, its ritual creation" (164).

Crane envisions his portion of the heroic task much as Blake, another of his mentor poets, did. He hopes to unchain the minds of his contemporaries and to replace their reified myths with a metaphorical construct which allows for the free play of the imagination. If the poem is well-crafted, it will cause the reader to become engaged in the poetic act and, in essence, to complete the poem in his or her mind. As John Unterecker explains, "We are the final ingredient in the poem" (Piculin 191). Thus the poet enlists the reader's

aid in the quest to heal the modern dissociative consciousness and together they attempt an heroic spiritual ascent via the act of creating the poem.

The Role of Language in "The Bridge"

Hart Crane wrote to Allen Tate in 1922: "The vocabulary of damnations and prostrations has been developed at the expense of...other moods....Let us invent an idiom..." (Letters 89). That new idiom, for Crane, would be an affective one and have its basis in the work of the French-Symbolists.

Crane, independently and through his study of Eliot's work, had been influenced in his use of poetic language by the work of Jules Laforgue and other French Symbolists regarding the emotive force and synergistic properties of words. For these poets, the symbolist mode of thought was superior to rationalistic thinking; the latter was for them "an inadequate system" which lead only to a "tragic quandary," as Crane remarked (Letters 238). Conscious of Eliot's use of symbolist technique in the creation of his waste land vision, Crane parodied Eliot's style, in "The Tunnel" and other sections of The Bridge, in an effort to denounce Eliot's usage and to recover the Symbolists' formal

strategies for his own purpose.

As Philip Horton comments on Crane's interest in the associative properties of words:

Crane also revived the poetic language of his time. And here again his lack of education was a distinct advantage to him. Although it often led him to commit such amusing mistakes as confusing 'cask' and 'casque'...., it also left his mind comparatively free of conventional meanings and associations. He was able to discover words, and use them, almost as things in themselves, prizing their colors, sounds, and shapes as more meaningful than their strict definitions. (310)

Horton does Crane a disservice in stating that Crane's poetic genius stems from his lack of education having left his mind "comparatively free of conventional meanings and associations," for Crane would have absorbed these meanings as part of the acculturation process of any individual living in society. Putting aside the issue of education, Crane's talent might better be described as an ability to perceive that beyond conventional meanings lay a new and more vital

language, one that, as Horton remarks, has nothing to do with strict definitions.

Committed to the symbolic power of language, Crane made lists of words and their meanings to prepare for those moments when his imagination would need to summon up this "word hoard." In "General Aims and Theories," Crane speaks of his belief that the poem should give "the reader...a single, new word, not before spoken and impossible to actually enunciate, but self-evident as an active principle in the reader's consciousness henceforward" (221). Crane's "new word" is, in actuality, the network of metaphorical images and phrases which comprise his new poetic idiom. As R.P. Blackmur remarks:

Crane habitually re-created his words from within, developing meaning to the point of idiom; and that habit is the constant and indubitable sign of talent. The meanings themselves are the idiom and have a twist and a life of their own. (57)

Yet these words are not the basis of a self-referential art; rather, the life which they have comes from their being the terms through which we grasp modern reality. Roy Harvey Pearce, in his analysis of The

Bridge, says Crane comes to ask: "Isn't the whole of reality charged with the power of agency? And isn't it the peculiar burden of language to reveal that power to us...?" (The Continuity of American Poetry 109). Perhaps the word "reveal" is misleading here because language for Crane is not simply a means of speaking about reality but an essential component of reality. As Crane explained in "General Aims and Theories," he hoped to locate words which would "ring with...vibrations or spiritual conviction" as these "common terms" are part of the shared experience of life "when it defines or extends itself" as it is forced to do in the modern era (218). In sum, the idiom which Crane labors to produce is an imaginative construct which functions as a bridge between apprehension and comprehension.

In developing his new idiom, Crane concerned himself with those aspects of poetry noted in my previous discussion of epic form, i.e., repetition, parataxis, digression, poetic diction and an American dialect. However, it was to be expected that he would rework them to meet his own needs.

Repetition in The Bridge, for instance, was rarely a matter of exact duplication of phrase or image. Like Emily Dickinson, whose poems derive their charac-

teristic power from slant rhymes and elliptical phrasing, Crane relied on such "slant" techniques as mirror imaging (e.g., the bridge and the tunnel) and parody (e.g., Maquoqueeta's dance and Magdalene's burlesque) in place of repetition. Crane commented to Waldo Frank:

Are you noticing how throughout the poem motives and situations recur--under the modifications of environment, etc.? The organic substances of the poem are holding a great many surprises for me....Greatest joys of creation" (Letters 275)¹⁶

John Unterecker, in his essay "The Architecture of The Bridge," goes a long way toward explicating Crane's use of repetition. Unterecker considers the structure of The Bridge to be a "mosaic" of linked materials which, by hinting at a multitude of connections, more accurately reflects the manner in which we experience reality. By choosing not to employ a fixed set of repeated motifs, Crane avoids reducing the complexities of life and rendering a more limited vision of it in his poem. He develops, instead, his referential framework which ultimately produces in the readers a "feeling of congruence" regarding the

diverse elements that constitute their world (81-82).

The way in which Crane employs the paratactic style is also an accomodation to the modern sense of dissociation. As noted previously, early epic was paratactic in style because language had not developed sufficiently to offer an alternative means of constructing poetic narrative. The Modernist writers chose to employ this type of construction because it emulates the modern milieu with its lack of causal relationships, hierarchical schemas or sense of progression.

The paratactic style, with its parallel presentations of seemingly disconnected material, was well suited to Crane's task. As Lynn Keller explains, in her essay on modern and contemporary epic poetry:

Nor can the narrative structure of traditional epic necessarily hold in the modern (or post-modern) period(s). The marked lack of narrative beginnings, middles, and ends in extended poems of the twentieth century is one reason Whitman is so frequently invoked as forebear. But even without Whitman's example, poets of the modernist era would

have sought out disjunctive structures in which meaning emerges from parataxis rather than causal and temporal sequence. For it is characteristic of modern thought to recognize pervasive indeterminacy and multiplicity, to question the possibility and desirability of totalization even when attempting works that are epic in scope. (7)

Though his predominant style is paratactic, Crane does not use it simply to point out the multiple realities which constitute the world, but also to emphasize the benefit of having this new knowledge. Once we are attuned to these various "strands" of reality, we will then be able to envision the potential linkages between them and, in doing so, to develop a new world-view.

Because Crane uses a paratactical structure in place of a chronological narrative, one would assume that there is no digressive material in The Bridge, as there is no main narrative from which to digress. Yet, in a manner of speaking, there is digression in the poem, and it can perhaps best be understood by recalling how Crane reformulated the heroic ideal.

Unlike earlier epics, The Bridge does not contain a central hero around whom the primary narrative would typically be shaped. However, if we look at Crane's heroic model, we will find that his heroic exemplars share one feature: each hero is primarily a questor. Further, Crane, again under the influence of Williams' poem "The Wanderer," conceives of the poet as the preeminent questor; it is the poet's persona in both "The Wanderer" and The Bridge who causes the search to commence by posing a key question. In Williams' early poem, it is "How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?" and in Crane's epic, "How many dawns...the seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him [?]."

We have come a long way from the early use of the question-and-answer format as a structural feature of epic poetry. In the time of the oral epic, the poet would employ questions as a means of prompting his or her memory, as well as that of the audience, as to what happens next in the narrative. The prompting question served as an especially useful means of refocussing attention when the epic was being told over a number of hours or days with breaks in between recitations. Through the nineteenth century and the era of Whitman's epic, which takes as its focal question "What is the

grass?," the answers to questions could still be delivered with confidence because a consensual understanding of the question, and what constituted an appropriate context for the answer, still existed. With Whitman we begin to see a broadening of the answer into a range of answers; nevertheless it is still possible for answers to be given.

However, in the Modernist epic, no communal basis for responding to the question may be assumed and, in fact, it is one of the objectives of this new form of epic to assert the breakdown in our collective understanding and to begin to repair it. As Michael Bernstein notes, in modern epic poems there is

the recognition that questions of individual fulfillment or redemption are ultimately not at stake, that every... privileged instant is at once the figure of a profoundly communal necessity, and the index of everything still absent from the daily activity of that community. (274)

Thus the key question becomes a means by which the poet may initiate a quest for a communal "answer," i.e., the myth or belief that is absent from life in modern

times.¹⁷

This is not to say that epic poets such as Crane and Williams do not provide answers--though they are not the firm, consensual, relatively stable and confident answers which existed in the pre-modern world. It would perhaps be better to call them "responses" in that they may be partial, elliptical, suggestive and, in all cases, necessitate the reader's involvement in constructing a complete response. In sum, they are what R.W.B. Lewis would call, in speaking of Crane's work, "visionary surmise": "The visionary imagination at its furthest thrust works only in questions and surmises--to which the answers are silence or tantalizing whispers" (373)

After identifying the key question, which initiates the journey, and any material which comprises a direct response to that question, we should be able to say that any material in the text not directly related to the question and response is part of a digression; and, since much of Crane's material is fragmented and disjunctive, it seems likely that there are many digressive episodes in The Bridge. Yet, the more one comes to understand the "mosaic" structure of this epic, and Crane's linkages via the logic of metaphor, the more

one realizes that there is nothing digressive in the poem. All of the material is devoted to the central task, that is, to finding a response which will satisfy the needs of the time. As R.W.B. Lewis explains, every experience in the poem "is a synecdoche; each stand for all the others, and taken together, they accumulate into that same central experience the poem as a whole is enacting" (86).

While those aspects of Crane's work having to do with his controlling concept of a logic of metaphor mark his major areas of poetic achievement, his language experiments in The Bridge concerning the development of a modern idiom that is distinctively American were far less fruitful. Unlike the brilliant shorter pieces such as "Praise for an Urn," which employs an everyday idiom to construct what is nevertheless a very complex idea, or "The Wine Menagerie," which utilizes a more sophisticated terminology to reveal "New thresholds, new anatomies," The Bridge attempts the curious task of combining hymnal grammar with the slang of the 1920s. Through the use of such archaic forms as "o," "thy" and "thine," Crane was successful in establishing a hymnal tone, which is most evident in "The Proem" and "Atlantis"; but only at the expense of maintaining a consis-

tent level of grammar and, more importantly, a grammatical usage that was compatible with the creation of an epic which was to be distinctively American and contemporary. Philip Horton believes that Crane's use of hymnal grammar in what was clearly meant to be an innovative epic was probably due to his heavy reading of the Elizabethan poets (309).

This ornate language is combined in the poem with Crane's rendering of the American slang and jazz rhythms of his day. "The River" subsection of The Bridge contains Crane's most extended attempt at translating the felt life of America in the twenties into epic form. It begins:

Stick your patent name on a signboard
 brother--all over--going west--young man
 Tintex--Japalac-Certain-teed Overalls ads
 and lands sakes! under the new playbill
 ripped
 in the guaranteed corner--see Bert Williams
 what? (62)

If we compare such passages to Scott Fitzgerald's contemporaneous literary renderings of the "jazz age," or to the jazz rhythms and colloquial motifs of George Gershwin's music, it is difficult to assert that Crane's

language remains viable. Readers of his own era would, of course, have understood such references as those to Japalac and Bert Williams; but it is questionable whether the general movement of the piece, its attempt to emulate the rhythms and the images of his time, was convincing even to Crane's immediate audience. Today, one can comprehend intellectually the aura Crane meant to convey; but it is difficult to feel it instinctively. The onomatopoetic, imagistic and rhythmic devices he employs do not cause an immediate sensory response in present-day readers; rather, they seem clumsy and at times ill-conceived.

As Crane wrote in "The Broken Tower,":

And so it was I entered the broken world

.

My word I poured. But was it cognate...?

(193)

If Crane's language is "incognizable," it is due, not to its "logic of metaphor" or to an errant romanticism, but at least in part to the use of an outmoded hymnal form of address and an approximation of American slang, neither one of which rings true.

Hart Crane's Metapoetic Voice

Hart Crane once remarked concerning his work, "I practice invention to the brink of intelligibility" (Cowley, Exile's Return 230). Because Crane developed his epic around a series of non-logical associations, the language of his poetry does not yield a great deal to the uninitiated reader. Crane strove to make his poetry "mirror" modernity and thus it presents a similarly enigmatic facade. This inaccessibility made Crane susceptible early on to the charge that his poetry was incoherent. Despite this criticism, Crane resisted moving any closer to the "brink of intelligibility," for he meant to test both "the Word" and the reader to the fullest extent possible.

The Bridge is difficult and perplexing because it forces the reader to abandon logic as the primary method of approach to the poem. Employing his formal strategy as a didactic tool, Crane hopes to push his readers beyond rationalism toward the development of their imaginative capabilities. His creation of a poetic language consisting of linked phrases and images is the means by which he hopes to open the reader's mind to perceiving the enabling metaphors by which the imagination constitutes the world.

This formal strategy displays an act of faith on Crane's part in its basic assumption that the readers will be able to exercise their imaginative faculties to the extent necessary to lend a (modern) myth to God. Unlike Eliot, Crane believed that human beings could arrive at a solution to the modern predicament through the medium of poetry; as Alan Trachtenberg notes, The Bridge "insists upon the sovereignty of art" ("Cultural Revisions..." 59). And in the "margin of overlap," as Kenneth Burke calls it, between the poet's and the reader's experience, we would identify that solution as our collective understanding of the nature of reality.¹⁸

However, Crane's poetry is not meant to function as a new religion; rather, it is a framework which offers its readers a means of creating a new consensus of meaning. As Lawrence Dembo explains:

The Bridge is not a naive attempt to set up a national myth..., but an account of the exiled poet's quest for a logos by which the Absolute he has known in his imagination will be made intelligible to the world. As that logos, the Bridge is neither a god nor a myth unto itself; rather it 'lends a myth to God,' or is

the myth by which the Absolute makes itself understood in the modern world: it is the new embodiment of the Word--'Deity's young name'--just as in the 'Ave Maria' section, Christ is the old embodiment of the Word to Columbus. (9-10)

Crane's new embodiment of the Word, which he hopes will restore human ability to sustain belief in the modern age, is an artifice, or what Pablo Picasso called the "lie" of art.¹⁹ Crane's persona in The Bridge commands Maquokeeta to "Lie to us--dance us back the tribal morn!" Once the tribal morn, or the site of renewed vision, has been restored to us through the "lie," we can engage in the metaphorical thought process that will allow us to devise new "strategies of artifice" with which to structure meaning, as the religious and philosophical ideologies of the past have allowed previous generations to do.²⁰

Like Blake, another of Crane's mentor poets, Crane uses the poetic lie, or "panoramic sleights" as he calls them in "The Proem," to free the reader's mind, to allow it to move beyond the realm of conventional thought to the pre-conscious, or mythic, level where the mind has a wider range of play. As Rosenthal and Gall

explain, the object of the Modernist poem "is neither to resolve a problem nor to conclude an action but to achieve the keenest, most open realization possible" (11).

Crane utilizes his formal strategy toward this goal as well. He promotes the fullest realization by his reader through the posing of his key question--"How many dawns...the seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him [?]"--and then defers an answer to this question, thus forcing the reader to remain attentive as the poem unfolds and yields the material for crafting a response. The reader must participate fully in the poetic act which has now become a quest for answers. As noted earlier, the poet incorporates no answer of the older order into his poem, but, instead, encourages the reader to formulate some response(s) by drawing upon the resources of the poem and the context which it provides for responding to the question.

The key question, "How many dawns...[?]," serves a number of other purposes. It gives the reader a sense of the movement-without-apparent-meaning which characterizes life in the twentieth century, and, because it is framed as a query rather than a comment, the question lifts the reader out of a more passive reading role

toward fuller engagement in the poetic quest. The steady and rhythmic movement of the question also signals the manner in which the poet envisions modern life. As we know, Crane chooses to frame his response in terms of a perpetual dialectic between the poles of joy and despair. In the final line of the poem, the Bridge "whispers antiphonal in azure swing," thus illustrating the continuous movement in life between those two poles. Though the magnitude of life's swing may seem bewildering, Crane demonstrates through the synecdochic repetitions of the poem that, like the gull's flight, this oppositional movement is repeated endlessly and forms a pattern in our lives. As Crane wrote to Otto Kahn, The Bridge is "an epic of modern consciousness" and its purpose is to reveal the lack of progress in modern life toward anything other than a "keen" realization of that dialectal process (Letters 308).

Yet Crane does offer us something beyond a vision of this endless "antiphonal swing." In "Atlantis" we also learn that at the apex, or "loft," of vision, the keenest eyes become like "seagulls stung with rime." This image functions as Crane's elliptical yet suggestive response to the key question. When we are successful in perceiving the dialectal process of life, we will

have attained a level of perception equal to that of such heroic figures as Walt Whitman, who is able to perceive America "bright with myth." We will have realized that the gull's movement is not only patterned but that the pattern is inherently meaningful, that it is "stung with rime." Though the gull's wings continue to "dip and pivot him," this movement has been transformed by the viewer's heightened perception of its occurrence. The viewer realizes that while the gull is able to soar above the earth, it nevertheless retains its common demeanor, its "thingness," and, in doing so, it symbolizes all of mortal life with its dual aspect of mortality and transcendence. As R.W.B. Lewis remarks, Crane "was striving to show the familiar world transfigured and enshrined and so, poetically speaking, redeemed--yet still familiar, still our world" (420).

With his insistence that the sublime has no existence apart from the mortal aspect of life, Crane is closer to Whitman and Wordsworth than to the transcendental visionaries for whom the mundane world disappears through transfiguration. Crane seeks only to awaken his readers to the larger meaning that is inherent in daily life, not to rise above it. His quest, therefore, is for deeper insight into the world we inhabit via the

modern poem which provides a means of "making the world new," to paraphrase Ezra Pound. As Roy Harvey Pearce explains, "The Bridge, as poem, is meant to be...a machine: one which, if the Prodigal sets it going right, will surely take him home. Only, home is where he has always been, but without knowing it" (The Continuity of American Poetry 97).

Having reached "Atlantis," we realize that Crane brings his poem to closure by defining the range of human experience with its movement between joy and despair, the finite and the infinite and the mundane world and its transfiguration. However, the poem remains open to a certain extent because Crane poses another question in the final stanza: "It is Cathay...?" Needless to say, a number of opinions have been advanced as to the purpose and meaning of posing this new question at the end of the poem.²¹

R.W.B. Lewis believes that "The Bridge concludes not with an exclamation of achievement, nor with a statement of finality, but with a question" because Crane knew "vision is never final, nor can it ever be sustained" (242). But this observation presumes that Crane accepts an older order of existence in which some final answer is either achieved or its inability to be

fixed is lamented by the poet. In Crane's scheme, any answer that is formulated must take into account the constant fluctuations which form the core of our existence. The Bridge does embody what he construes to be a sustained vision, but it is one that acknowledges the endless process of change fundamental to human life.

Frederick J. Hoffman views the question "Is it Cathay...?" as being indicative of Crane's ultimate sense of doubt and fear regarding his vision (273). Yet The Bridge offers little evidence to support that theory since Crane, like Whitman, has clearly delineated in his epic that the negative aspects of life are an essential component of human existence. Fear and doubt are the necessary antithesis of hope and joy and without them life would have no meaning.

Samuel Hazo perhaps comes closer with his assessment that the question emphasizes the significance of the continuous quest. He comments: "It could well be that Crane is insisting that the true meaning of the search is not in the thing sought, but in the seeking" (118). Crane certainly means to focus the reader's attention on the necessity of "new wandering" in search of ways of compensating for the loss of the older order of consciousness; and this is the first important task

which Crane's poem undertakes.

Yet The Bridge does more than indicate the need for the quest; it also defines the terms of that quest, the most significant of which is the meaning of Cathay. Crane offers us in the paradigmatic experience of Columbus a perception of Cathay, not simply as a physical destination, but also as a realization of the spiritual potential inherent in that locale. Although the great quests from the times of the early traders and explorers have been conceived of primarily as commercial undertakings, Crane realizes that such discoveries become meaningless if we do not understand that this search for "Cathay" as material wealth has caused us to lose sight of the older search for the "Grail," or spiritual well-being. In light of that knowledge, the first objective of the quest, as Crane sees it, must be a reformulation of purpose.

It is highly appropriate that Crane should have chosen Columbus as his poetic exemplar, for Columbus meant to sail to the treasure-laden Indies; America only became his "Cathay" by accident. Yet, as an unexplored land, America lay open to the imagination. Thus it becomes an appropriate site for the infusion of the material quest with a search for spiritual regeneration. The

land could recover the symbolic potential it had held for the earlier, Native American population, and "Cathay" would become symbolic of an integrated quest. By selecting Columbus' voyages to illustrate that the discovery of America involved the most risky yet fortunate of wanderings, Crane fulfills in The Bridge the task which Joel Barlow undertook a century earlier in his Columbiad of crafting an American epic which elaborates the complex meaning of the New World experience.

However, we are still left wondering why Crane asks at the end of "Atlantis" whether it is Cathay that has been found. Surely he knows the meaning of Cathay since one of his purposes has been to establish an understanding of it through the creation of his epic. I believe he is once again "testing the Word" to see if it is "cognate." He is asking his readers if they have understood the significance of Columbus' journey or the workings of the poetry of Whitman and Poe or their own journey through The Bridge. Have they understood that "Cathay" is not simply a place but their own native soil latent with meaning? Moreover, when Crane asks "Is it Cathay...?," he is posing a question which each of his readers must answer individually.

In leaving us with this question at the end of

the poem, Crane would have us realize that only we can decide if his epic has been successful in its attempt to span the gap between desire and comprehension. If it has, then The Bridge, fulfills Crane's own desire that poetry "may well give [the reader] the real connective experience, the very 'sign manifest'" (Letters 237) which would serve as the basis for the restoration of belief in the modern era.

Notes

¹ James Breslin notes: "From the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties, Eliot was the literary authority in both England and America; in addition, to the enormous prestige attached to both his creative and theoretical writings, he had, via his editorship at The Criterion and Faber, a practical means of implementing his authority; he became known as the 'Pope of Russell Square.'" See Introduction to William Carlos Williams, Something to Say: William Carlos Williams on Younger Poets, ed. and intro. James E.B. Breslin (NY: New Directions, 1985): 12. Eliot's "programme" encompasses a great deal more than is discussed here; however, The Waste Land serves as a focal point of response for other poets of the era.

² John Unterecker notes of Hart Crane's work, for example, that Crane utilized "T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land and James Joyce's Ulysses (both published in 1922) [as] structural models for The Bridge, the work that would dominate the rest of his life. (The Bridge was initially conceived of as an 'answer' to what Crane then saw as Eliot's pessimism...)." See Introduction to The Poems of Hart Crane, ed. Marc Simon (NY: Liveright, 1986): xxvii-xxviii.

3 Frank Kermode argues that Eliot's idea of a "dissociation of sensibility" may be historically incorrect; however, the "doctrine" was extremely influential and should be attended to for this reason. See "Dissociation of Sensibility," The Kenyon Review XIX (Spring 1957): 169-194.

4 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Hart Crane's letters are taken from The Letters of Hart Crane: 1916-1932, ed. Brom Weber (Berkeley: U of California P, 1965) and are cited parenthetically in the text as Letters.

5 For a summary of the criticism which Crane's epic poem, The Bridge, engendered, see Helge Normann Nilsen, Hart Crane's Divided Vision, (Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 1980): 9-18.

6 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Hart Crane's poetry and prose, with the exception of his letters, are taken from The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane, ed. Brom Weber (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1966).

7 Gordon Grigsby considers the structuring principle of The Bridge in terms of "the tension between doubt and vision" in "Hart Crane's Doubtful Vision: A Note on the 'Intention' of The Bridge,"

College English 24 (April 1963): 521 and passim.

8 "The Wanderer" in The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams (NY: New Directions, 1951): 3-12. All future citations of "The Wanderer" are from this edition.

9 Williams' In the American Grain (NY: New Directions, 1956), was originally published in 1925. Roy Harvey Pearce has called it a "proto-epic," and it is another work which influenced Crane in his development of The Bridge.

10 Crane was, of course, influenced by other contemporary writers in addition to Williams. James Joyce's Ulysses was an early influence on Crane's work, and that of all the other Modernist writers. Crane was also quite taken with Sherwood Anderson's writing, particularly Winesburg, Ohio. In his essay on Anderson, published in 1921, Crane remarked: "In Anderson there has been some great sincerity, perhaps the element of the soil itself personified in him, that has made him refuse to turn aside to offer the crowds those profitable 'lollypops' that have 'made' and ruined so many of our writers" (211).

11 Hart Crane complained in a letter to Allen Tate that critics such as Yvor Winters, Genevieve

Taggard and Gorham Munson are "in pursuit of some cure-all. Poetry as poetry (and I don't mean merely decorative verse) isn't worth a second reading any more." (Letters 353)

¹² Crane wrote to Caresse Crosby regarding the format for the Crosbys' publication of The Bridge: "the photograph...goes between the 'Cutty Sark' Section and the 'Hatteras' Section. That is the 'center' of the book, both physically and symbolically" (Letters 347).

¹³ Allen Tate was most prominent among those who commented pejoratively that Crane's poetry was romantic in style. See Tate's "Hart Crane" in The Man of Letters in the Modern World; Selected Essays: 1928-1955 (Cleveland and NY: Meridian/World, 1955): 283-294. Crane responded, in a letter to Tate: "The fact that you posit The Bridge at the end of a tradition of romanticism may prove to have been an accurate prophecy....A great deal of romanticism may persist--of the sort to deserve serious consideration, I mean. But granting your accuracy--I shall be humbly grateful if The Bridge can fulfill simply the metaphorical inferences of its title..." (352-353). Crane believed that the romantic tradition as represented by Blake and Whitman could be accommodated to the needs of the twen-

tieth century and was frustrated at the inability of Tate, Yvor Winters, et al. to see how his poetry fit into that visionary tradition.

14 Crane wrote to Otto Kahn in 1927, "What I am really handling, you see, is the Myth of America. Thousands of strands have had to be searched for, noted and interwoven." (Letters 305)

15 On December 26, 1929, Crane sent Caresse Crosby the hastily completed "Quaker Hill" which was the final section of The Bridge that he wrote. He apologized for "Quaker Hill," calling it an "accent mark" to the poem (Letters 347). Crane had earlier indicated his expectation of having the opportunity to revise some of his material for a second edition of The Bridge (Letters 345).

16 In an earlier letter to Waldo Frank, dated February 7, 1923, Crane remarked, concerning his earlier poem "The Marriage of Faustus and Helen": "the entire poem is so packed with cross-currents and multiple systems that I am anxious that you should see the thing as I do..." (Letters 121).

17 Non-answerable questions are also employed as a rhetorical device; however, this usage occurs throughout the epic tradition.

¹⁸ See Kenneth Burke, Counter-statement, (Los Altos, CA: Hermes Publications, 1953): 78.

¹⁹ Picasso states: "We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that make us realize truth...." In "Art as Individual Ideas," The Arts III (May 1923): 315-326; reprinted in Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr., eds., The Modern Tradition (NY: Oxford UP, 1965): 25.

²⁰ David A. Hollinger uses the term "strategies of artifice" to mean "a distinctively modernist family of strategies for dealing with [the modern dilemma]". See "The Knower and the Artificer," American Quarterly 39 (Spring 1987): 38.

²¹ For a survey of observations regarding Crane's posing of this question, see Helge Normann Nilsen, Hart Crane's Divided Vision (Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 1980): 196, note 135.

CHAPTER IV

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' PATERSON

"Save the words. Yes, I repeat SAVE
THE WORDS. "

-- William Carlos Williams

Along with such poets as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) believed the crisis in modern consciousness should be the central concern of poetry in the first part of the twentieth century. He was committed to developing a poetics appropriate to an age in which there appeared to be "No one/to witness/and adjust, no one to drive the car."¹

During the early years of his career, when he was involved with the Imagist movement, and through his many years of work on Paterson (1946-58), Williams concentrated on the formal properties of language as the basis for creating a modern poetry. Reacting against the "sentimental" and "stodgy" verse in vogue at the turn of the century, Williams stressed the urgent need for a renovation of poetic language. He was not attempting to supplant the older, religiously-based

system of belief with an aesthetically-based one, but rather, like Hart Crane, to develop a linguistic framework which would assist modern society to develop a sense of definition and purpose. As Paul Bové remarks, Williams wished "to renew language, not for the creation of a new 'myth,' but, more fundamentally, to return language to Modern consciousness as a means for gathering a world in which humanity can dwell" (586).

Williams believed an essential feature of this new language must be the creation of an idiom that was distinctly American. Noting that he had burned his imitations of English romantic poetry, Williams asked American writers to reject the call for an American literature based on the direct extension of the European literary tradition and, instead, to formulate their art by using indigenous materials. His ideas regarding the appropriate focus for American artists made Williams a vocal critic of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the latter a friend from college days, for their removal to Europe and commitment to the "Continental" style.

Yet Williams admired Eliot and Pound for their poetic innovations, if not their literary goals, and, like Hart Crane, was influenced by their work. As Stephen Tapscott notes concerning Eliot's influence on

Williams, Williams "takes the terms of Eliot's fractured, allusive associativity and rewrites them into his own nativist countertradition" (American Beauty 91).

In addition to being affected by the loose, ruminative technique of such poems as Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Williams also studied and incorporated some aspects of Ezra Pound's work into his own mature style. In his Autobiography, Williams recalls, "We had followed Pound's instructions, his famous 'Don't,' eschewing inversions of the phrase, the putting down of what to our senses was tautological and so, uncalled for, merely to fill out a standard form" (148).²

Williams also learned from studying Pound's work what was not going to be of value in formulating his own style. While Pound championed a return to the sophisticated poetry which epitomized the "golden age" of European literature, Williams stated his belief that a polished style would be detrimental to the development of a truly American poetry. As James Breslin explains:

By imitating Pound, Williams learned he could not with conviction write the kind of smooth, concentrated, highly finished song his friend had mastered. He also learned, it appears, what he did not want

to be: he was no courtier, but a plain, inconspicuous inhabitant of the ordinary world. (William Carlos Williams: An American Artist 15)

Their antithetical positions are summed up in a comment made by Pound which was incorporated by Williams into Paterson: "Your interest is in the bloody loam but what/I'm after is the finished product."³

The publication of Eliot's The Waste Land convinced Williams, as it had Hart Crane, that there was a pressing need for American poets to renounce the direction that Eliot and Pound's work was taking. In Williams' view, Eliot and Pound were not simply pursuing another avenue of exploration, but were defaulting on their responsibility to search for a solution to the modern dilemma. He wrote to Horace Gregory:

I have maintained from the first that Eliot and Pound by virtue of their hypersensitivity (which is their greatness) were too quick to find a culture (the English continental) ready made for their assertions. They ran from something else, something cruder but, at the same time, newer, more dangerous but heavy with rewards for

the sensibility that could reap them. They couldn't. Or didn't. But they both ended by avoiding not only the possibilities offered but, at the same time, the deeper implications intellectually which our nascent culture accented.⁴

In stating his reaction to the stance Eliot and Pound had taken, Williams also gives some hint of his own artistic temperament. His talent was of a cruder, more rough-hewn variety than theirs and was, he felt, better suited to the crafting of a poetry which should be informed by and concerned with the modern dilemma.

Eliot's strength was that of a "summative genius," he concluded, and while we should value such "extractors," we must live and create only in the present.⁵ Upbraiding Eliot, Williams' poetic persona remarks in Paterson: "Who is it spoke of April? Some/insane engineer. There is no recurrence./The past is dead." (III.iii:142).

Interestingly enough, it was Williams' study of such early epics as El Cid which prompted him to reject the traditions of the past in his attempt to create a poetry suitable for the twentieth century. In his essay on Federico Garcia Lorca, Williams notes that

the Poema El Cid sets a standard, which held up for eight hundred years, in declaring "the here and the now" to be the appropriate ground for poetry (SE 220). He explains further, in "The Poem as a Field of Action": "It may be said that I wish to destroy the past. It is precisely a service to tradition, honoring it and serving it that is envisioned and intended by my attack, and not disfigurement--confirming and enlarging its application" (SE 284). Thus Williams defended his commitment to reworking epic form so that it would accurately reflect life in "the roar of the present" (Paterson III.iii:144).

In challenging Eliot and Pound and their Continental style, Williams, like Crane, turned to the work of Walt Whitman in search of a basis upon which to construct a new poetry. This is not to say that Williams gave unqualified approval to Whitman's work. Williams was particularly unsympathetic to what he perceived as Whitman's attempt to directly imitate nature in his poetry. In a letter to Kay Boyle, Williams remarked:

Whitman was a magnificent failure....

Whitman to me is one broom stroke and that is all. He could not go on. Nature, the

Rousseauists who foreshadowed Whitman, the imitation of the sounds of the sea per se, are a mistake. Poetry has nothing to do with that. It is not nature. It is poetry. (SL 135)

While he held to the principle of "No ideas but in things," that is, a belief that the "things" of the world might constitute the authentic basis for modern poetry, Williams did not wish to imitate them, but, rather, to make "replicas" of them through the medium of art. "It is not a matter of 'representation,'" he remarked in Spring and All, "but of [the] separate existence [of art]" ("Prose from Spring and All" 22). And, to Williams' mind, since art exceeded the limitations of ordinary life, these "replicas" were to be creative enlargements of the natural world upon which they were based. Williams explains in his Auto-biography:

It is NOT to hold the mirror up to nature that the artist performs his work. It is to make, out of the imagination, something not at all a copy of nature, but something quite different, a new thing, unlike anything else in nature,

a thing advanced and apart from it. (241)

Thus, in Paterson for example, the "voice" of the Falls, or nature, is "answered" by the poem which is not an imitation of nature, but an artistic construct which reveals and articulates the potential latent in the natural world.

Despite Williams' reservations concerning Whitman's view of the relationship of art to nature, he lauded Whitman for the groundbreaking nature of his work. In "An Approach to the Poem," Williams states, "I think our one major lead, as Americans, is to educe and exploit the significance of Walt Whitman's formal excursions."⁶ The Whitman who dared to break with the older tradition and who gave his attention to the formal properties of language was the poet to whom Williams looked for direction. In Whitman's rejection of the "old forms," Williams saw the basis for his own refutation of Eliot and Pound's work. As Tapscott notes, Williams

concludes that the danger of Eliot's success is the danger of the domination of the 'English' iambic line, a cultural form unrelated to 'actual experience' in America. (American Beauty 37)

Whitman's language experiments, particularly his

introduction of the long, rhythmic line in his poetry, gave Williams license to make additional explorations for the purpose of constructing an innovative, poetic structure.

Williams' own language experiments were also influenced by such contemporaries as James Joyce, whose Ulysses attracted attention on both sides of the Atlantic, and the work of Gertrude Stein. In Joyce's formal technique, Williams saw the "reaffirmation of the forever-sought freedom of truth from usage," that is, a liberation of words from their habitual connotations (SE 28). Williams saw a similar type of experimental word play in the work of Gertrude Stein whom he praised for her ability to "break away from that paralyzing vulgarity of logic" (SE 13). Such writers "escape[d] the bald literalism" which Walt Whitman had decried a half century earlier.⁷

For Williams, as for Whitman and Modernists such as Joyce and Stein, renovation of the language could only be accomplished by means of bold experimentation, even if these poetic experiments resulted in seriously-flawed works. Williams remarks about Joyce that he "has broken through and drags his defects with him, a thing English critics cannot tolerate" (SE 85). But

experimentation, even if it revealed the poet's painful vulnerability, as it would in Williams' case, was preferable to a retreat into the established literary tradition. Creating a new poetic language was perceived as tantamount to resolving the modern spiritual crisis; thus they construed the aesthetic task as an heroic undertaking. Williams, who might have been speaking of his own work as well, explained concerning Joyce's work: "He is looking ahead to find if there be a way, a literary way (in his chosen category) to save the world--or call it (as a figure) to save the static, worn-out language" (SE 89).

Williams conceived of his own attempt to save the language as having two components, discovery and invention. These terms in themselves bring to mind not only the spirit of pioneering which is thought to be characteristically American, but also the Yankee inclination for jerry-rigging whatever the occasion demands. In this case, the situation called for a "homemade" poem which Williams, from his early years on, had conceived of as a special kind of crafted object, one which would go of itself once it was put into motion. He even referred to the poem as a machine.⁸

Because his method was one of experimentation, part of Williams' poetic process necessitated a certain amount of tearing down or manipulation of parts of the older poetic--and historical--tradition. For Williams, as for Joyce, language had to be violently manipulated at times and even "destroyed" in order to renew its ability to engender meaning. Nancy Barry, in discussing Williams' incorporation into Paterson of fragments of earlier works, including some of his own, remarks that Williams employs these fragments "to demonstrate that [writing]...can be re-imagined and rediscovered in the 'heat' of destruction as well as invention" (3).

Destruction becomes a major theme in Paterson as the poet seeks to tear away all the old forms which hinder a rebirth of the language. Poets working in the established tradition are assailed by the poetic persona, and the past, as it is represented in bound volumes, is burned up in the library fire in Book Three. However, for Williams the word "destruction" also connotes a type of "careless" action. In Paterson, the poet states: "Only one answer: write carelessly so that nothing that is/not green will survive" (III.iii:129). The purposely unrevised double negative carries in it the crucial element of the poet's dictum:

that whatever is negative, or "not green," must be exposed so that it may be destroyed. As Roy Harvey Pearce explains of Williams' technique, "The carelessness is cultivated because it is precisely that mode of destructiveness which will make possible a new creation of language..." (The Continuity of American Poetry 124).

When he has cleared away the dead wood of the older forms, Williams is left, as Pound so aptly remarked, with "the bloody loam," which is another "lead" he has taken from Whitman, who declared:

Language, be it remember'd, is not an
abstract construction of the learn'd,
or of dictionary-makers, but is something
arising out of the work, needs, ties,
joys, affections, tastes of long generations
of humanity, and has its bases
broad and low, close to the ground.

("Slang in America" 1166)

The native American soil and the people who inhabited it would be Williams' source rock, the "ore" from which he would release the "radiant gist" of life, as he explains in Paterson. He would not turn away from the commonness and vulgarity of American life which had put off

Eliot and Pound. Williams' sensibility was, as Anne Janowitz explains,

part of a curious American version of Romanticism, a sensibility which attempts to rescue spiritual values from the most banal and material objects of every day life. The inventor who takes the available materials and turns them into a gramophone must have a special kind of faith in the materials themselves. (303)

Williams felt that his artistic temperament was best suited to this sort of task. As he described his own work in a letter to Harvey Breit, "there are dirt men, the laborers who try to keep alive the geist, the undisciplined power of the unimaginable poem...."[sic] (SL 194). As both a poet and physician, Williams would deal with the "things unmentionable" which flourished in the back streets, or, as Whitman advised, stay low and close to the ground in formulating his poetics. For if the poet would only "embrace the foulness," that is, acknowledge rather than ignore the vulgar actuality of everyday life, there would then be the possibility of transforming that foulness into something sanctified, into the "Beautiful Thing" which

the poet seeks (Paterson I.iii:39, 103, 124-5).

The immediate problem for Williams was how to present the everyday circumstance in such a way as to make its inner radiance apparent to his audience. Williams wished to devise a form which would renovate American poetry in the same way in which Joyce's new structure had renewed British prose. As Williams noted, what was significant about Joyce's work was that "the form of the thought [forces] the reader into a new and special frame of mind favorable to the receipt of his disclosure" (SE 28). Williams' commitment to formal technique as the key to a new poetics is summed up in his statement that "It is not by what the poem says that we have the greatness. It is by what the poem has been made to be that we recognize it."⁹

Although he devoted himself to the problem of form throughout his career, it was his longer works which offered the opportunity for a large-scale trial of his language experiments. These works include "The Wanderer" (1914), which influenced both Hart Crane's The Bridge and his own later epic poem; Spring and All (1923), Williams' first extended attempt to respond to Eliot's critique of the modern age; and In the American Grain (1925). Although it is a prose work,

In the American Grain is generally recognized as the prototype for Williams' most ambitious long poem, Paterson, which he began formulating in the 1920s and published in the form of five "books" between 1946 and 1958.

In his longer work, Williams developed perhaps his most distinctive--and daring--formal technique, that is, his use of juxtapositions: of poetry with prose, of the language of the past with the common speech of his day, and of the placing of "formal," or polished, stanzas adjacent to those which were "provisional," or less finished.¹⁰ The artistic risks which Williams took in presenting these collages, which had such a raw and contingent feel to them, are Williams' reply to the work of Eliot and Pound but, more importantly, they are his response to the modern dilemma.

Paterson is the foremost example of Williams' innovative technique and stands as his major attempt to devise an adequate form for twentieth-century poetry. As John Thirlwall notes, "To write of Paterson is to write of Williams' entire career: the period from the conception of Paterson to its virtual conclusion in 1957 covers forty-five years of poetic composition" ("William Carlos Williams 'Paterson': The Search for the

Redeeming Language" 252). Since William's subject is the quest for a new language, it is not surprising that his central figure should be the poet's persona.

The Heroic Ideal in "Paterson"

The nature of Paterson's quest is set out in the opening lines of the Preface to the poem:

"Rigor of beauty is the quest. But how
will you find beauty when it is locked in
the mind past all remonstrance?" (3)

[Williams' quotation marks]

Paterson responds that one must "make a start,/out of particulars." However, this firm and unhesitating response is followed by a disquieting portrait of the protagonist:

just another dog
among a lot of dogs. What
else is there? And to do?
The rest have run out--
after the rabbits.
Only the lame stands--on
three legs. Scratch front and back.
Deceive and eat. Dig
a musty bone (3)

Paterson appears to have none of the attributes of earlier heroes of the epic tradition. But since the Eliots and the Pounds have "run out after the rabbits," Williams tells us, we are left with Paterson, who has some of the characteristics of Eliot's failed protagonist J. Alfred Prufrock. Williams' central figure is one who Eliot would reject as being too flawed, inept and unsure of himself; yet Williams chooses him to be the epic hero. This selection reveals Williams' mixed feelings concerning his own fitness to become the poet-hero which America needs. While confident that the hero must derive from the common soil, he is at times skeptical of his own ability to prove the theory he has advanced.

Yet he ventures forth, and once his persona begins his journey quest, he encounters those two, oppositional segments of society with which, Williams believes, the poet must come to terms: the intellectuals and the mass of humanity. Although Paterson's inner debate concerning the intellectuals does not take place until Book Three of Paterson, it is clear from the outset that Paterson construes this segment of the population to be the guardian of the status quo. "Who restricts knowledge?" the poet asks in Book One. The

response, in part, is: "the knowledgeable idiots, the university" who "should be devising means/to leap the gap" (I.iii:34). Instead, they have immobilized knowledge by conveying it in a "frozen," conventionalized form, rather than rethinking its meaning (or meanings) in terms of current needs and thereby allowing it to become "fluid" knowledge once again.

This idea is an outgrowth of Williams' view, which he elaborated in In the American Grain, of conventional history as a "frozen" form. In this proto-epic work, he remarks that "if there is agreement on one point in history, be sure there's interest there to have it so and that's not truth." History is at odds with the truth because it does not "stay open" as it should. It twists lives forcibly about events in its drive toward the general and the concrete, while literature alone protects humanity from its tyranny (188). Rather than accepting conventional history ("that lie!"), Williams urges his readers to view the past as "a living thing, something moving, undecided, swaying-- Which way will it go?--something on the brink of the Unknown, as we are today..." (192-193).

Williams makes specific reference to Eliot and to Hart Crane in his indictment--Eliot for valuing the

past over the present and Crane for, he believes, relying on the past as the basis for relief in the future. The poet's persona declares that "The mesh [of the past]/is decayed. Loosen the flesh/from the machine, build no more bridges" (III.iii:142). As we know, for Williams, the present can be the only genuine source for answers: "I cannot stay here/to spend my life looking into the past://the future's no answer." (III.iii:145). Employing the same metaphor for positive action which Crane used in The Bridge, Williams invokes fire as a cleansing power and uses it, in Book Three, to burn down the library, the symbolic repository of dead language. He does not wish to "succumb" to its enticement and abandon his quest to locate meaning in "the present pouring down" (III.iii:144).

Paterson must then investigate that other segment of society, common humanity, to see what it might offer the poet. "Who are these people.../among whom I see myself[?]," Paterson asks as he journeys through his eponymous home town. But he does not know them, and they do not know themselves: "They walk incommunicado," (I.i:9). The Whitmanesque phrasing of this response tells us, beyond the fact that the people are incomprehensible to the poet as yet, that they had been known

at one time--to Whitman who "tallied" them in "Song of Myself." But Whitman's knowledge is from another age and it, too, has become frozen. As Williams remarks in In the American Grain, the citizens of the United States today "will not look. They float without question. Their history is to them an enigma."¹¹ It is the poet's task to encounter and redeem them once again by establishing their identity in the modern era.

Yet, by the end of Book 5 of Paterson,

Williams will have failed to reach this goal, not because he is unable to invent an idiom, but because, like Wordsworth, he has not been able to "confound and identify his own feelings" with those of the common people.¹² Williams, like the earlier Romantic poet, is separated from the very people in whom he believes is vested the meaning of the modern age. In Williams' case, his failure to unite with them does not have as much to do with the difference in social class as it does with that aspect of his personality which made him choose to study and practice medicine. Williams' attention to both the physical and psychological make-up of human beings and his propensity for analytic observation evolved into a therapeutic distance from his subject. It is the distance which the physician must assume in

order to properly diagnose and treat the patient; but, at the same time, it is a distance which threatens the success of the poetic task which Williams has set for himself.

Williams was acutely aware of functioning in two separate roles, as a physician and a poet, or "man of medicine and medicine man," as Kenneth Burke called him.¹³ He explains in the Autobiography: "My business, aside from the mere physical diagnosis...is to make a different sort of diagnosis concerning [people] as individuals, quite apart from anything for which they seek my advice. That fascinates me." (358). Yet he remained apart from those individuals whose lives he observed. In a 1937 essay entitled "The Basis of Faith in Art," Williams acknowledges this separation when he states that the average person cannot appreciate what art brings to life. But, he adds, although this individual "doesn't know he lacks and needs [art]...I know he needs it. I know what he needs better than he and I cannot ignore it....There can be no satisfaction for the poet otherwise. What can he be without the mob?" (SE 192-193).

It is not clear from this essay whether Williams perceived at the time the dilemma created by his thera-

peutic distance from "the mob." However, there is clear evidence to suggest that Williams comprehended his situation by the time Book Two of Paterson was published in 1948. In the lengthy letters from Cress incorporated into the text, Cress complains that Williams is part of a group of writers "who are so sheltered from life in the raw" and lack experience, or "pioneer living" as she calls it, that they cannot hope to develop a literature based on the felt life of the common people (II.iii:87, 90). Although Cress attacks the poet on the basis of his sex and social class, Williams' problem lies, to a greater extent, with his inability to substitute the emotional engagement necessary between poet and subject for the dispassionate observation necessary to ensure the psychological well-being of the physician attending the patient. Near the end of Book Four, Paterson has to confess that he is not able "To bring himself in,/hold together wives in one wife," i.e., he cannot "marry" his poetic self to the vulgar beauty of the people who surround him (IV.iii:191). Though Paterson struggles valiantly throughout the poem with the terrifying stream of actuality, in the end he remains divorced from the people who are the object of his desire.

However, Paterson is able to accomplish another goal, one of which we are perhaps unaware for some length of time. The poet purposely keeps us at bay, offering only hints as to its existence through such provocative comments as: "What but indirection/will get to the end of the sphere?" (V.i:211). Williams, through indirection, temporarily diverts our attention from an important realization: that Paterson has been coming to terms with his own identity. Due to Williams' evasive tactics, the reader is led, slowly, in emulation of Paterson's own progress, to a realization of the hero's self-understanding.

Paterson's gradual self-disclosure is an heroic achievement which has been a conventional feature of epic since the time of the Homeric poet; however, Williams has reworked that convention in several ways. First, his hero, is tested primarily as to his mental capacity and endurance, and is only subjected secondarily to physical trials (e.g., his sexual encounters with Phyllis in Book Four). Williams also diverts the reader from realizing that Paterson's emerging self-consciousness becomes the central action of the poem and thus supersedes his confrontational encounters with society, which have been foregrounded throughout the

poem. With this subterfuge, Williams forces the readers of his epic to apply themselves if they wish to understand what it is that Paterson has accomplished by the end of the poem.

Perhaps Williams' greatest readjustment of the heroic ideal is his testing and consequent exposure of his hero as an ordinary human being. The hero of Williams' epic does not embody the supreme attributes of his race; rather he is distinguished by his human imperfections, by the fact that he has been "ridded from Paradise" (III.i:108). As both man and poet, Paterson quite painfully comes to know the limits of his abilities. He does not have superior strength and wisdom; however, upon finding that he has not accomplished his task of "unlocking" beauty, he continues his quest.

Williams does not mean to suggest that his persona's continuous questing makes him a valiant fool like Don Quixote. He might appear to be a picaresque figure--he is, after all, depicted in the Preface as a "stray dog" and a "guilty lover." But, unlike the picaresque, Paterson possesses the capacity to attain self-realization and to celebrate the "perceiving self."¹⁴ And this becomes Paterson's saving grace; although he is very much like Eliot's Prufrock in appearance, he re-

fuses to give in to despair and continues to rely upon his own abilities, however limited, to meet his needs.

For Williams, Paterson epitomizes the true heroes of the modern age who are those individuals willing to acknowledge their human fallibility yet able to muster the inner determination to continue on toward their goal. Within the realm of art, the heroes are those artists who formulate their imaginative construct and then are able, as "E.D." advises Paterson, "to submit to your own myths" (I.ii:28).

At the end of Book Four, which was originally the final section of the epic, Paterson heads inland, signalling Williams' commitment to his own "myth" of a nativist tradition. This movement also serves as Williams' opportunity to acknowledge his own heroes. These individuals--Christopher Columbus, Marie Curie, Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe--are the figures who have directly influenced Williams' conception of the heroic ideal, and, therefore, the shape of Paterson's quest.

It is in Columbus' journals that Williams found the words which comprise one of the central phrase motifs of Paterson. Columbus writes, concerning his journey to the New World: "On Friday, the twelfth of

October, we anchored before the land....During that time I walked among the trees which was the most beautiful thing which I had ever known" (III.ii:178). Heading inland, Columbus discovered America to be the "Beautiful Thing" that Williams also hopes to rediscover through his art. In an ecstatic passage in Paterson, Columbus' description of America becomes conflated with Marie Curie's efforts to liberate the massive energy force latent in uranium ore; this scene marks the spiritual apex of the poem.

Williams goes on to employ Dr. Curie as the primary heroic model for the poet in Paterson. His affinity for her life and work is not surprising. Like Williams, she was trained as a physician, although she had started out, in Williams' words, as "a small Polish baby-nurse" (III.ii:179). This woman, born of common stock and possessing meager economic resources, became the discoverer of radium and inventor of the term "radioactivity" and was awarded the Nobel Prize in two fields. She epitomized all that Williams hoped to become as a result of his own imaginative labor.

Behind Williams' epic stand the figures of Whitman and Poe, who were two of Williams' strongest literary influences. Although Williams deleted all

overt references to Whitman from the final manuscript of Paterson, it is clear from earlier drafts and from prose pieces that Paterson ends his journey in Book Four by heading toward Whitman's home in Paumonok. Thus Williams honors the poet who is his direct predecessor in the search for a modern American poetic form.

Paterson's turning inland is also meant to refer the reader to Williams' earlier prose-poem in In the American Grain which lauds Edgar Allan Poe. In this earlier work, Williams explains that Poe's "greatness is in that he turned his back and faced inland to originality..." (226). By exploring his own native consciousness, Poe was able to accomplish several major objectives for American letters: he refused to copy English styles and thereby "cleared the ground" for the establishment of an indigenous literature, he held to the local and the particular, and he moved away from sentiment towards an emphasis on form. It is clear that what Williams saw as the foremost attributes of Poe's work were those elements he valued most and wished to embody in his own poetry. Like Crane, he viewed Poe as an artist who fought desperately against his own flawed nature to succeed at his art. Williams admired him as one who descended into the darkest recesses of human

nature for the purpose of presenting the most truthful rendering of human life.

The poet's persona makes a similar descent in Paterson, explaining that he believes it is essential to reach "the base" before a process of renewal can begin. The descent is "made up of despairs"; yet it will bring about "a new awakening" (II.iii:78, 85). Thus Williams' poet-questor is characterized as one who continues to journey, despite repeated failures, with the hope of reversing despair. There is really no other choice, for Williams includes those who "do nothing" among his list of individuals who hinder the discovery of meaning (I.iii:34). The only option the modern poet has is to go on trying to articulate the "roar of the falls" through the medium of the poem. Williams explains in his Autobiography that by doing so, the poet becomes the hero of the modern age:

To do this is what makes a writer worth heeding: that somehow or other, whatever the source may be, he has gone to the base of the matter to lay it bare before us in terms which, try as we may, we cannot in the end escape. There is no choice then but to accept him and

make him a hero. (358)

The Role of Language in "Paterson"

Throughout the poem Paterson laments his failure to invent a sufficient form or even to find "one phrase that will/lie married beside another for delight" (III.iii:140). We learn, along with Paterson, that neither the language of the past nor that of the present can be of aid in resolving the contemporary spiritual crisis--at least not in their current form. Yet, despite his persona's evident despair, Williams continues to manipulate the "frozen" forms of extant language to make them fluid once again. He remains confident that language is malleable and that his approach will ultimately yield success. As he remarks in an essay entitled "A 1 Pound Stein":

For everything we know and do is tied up
with words, with the phrases words make,
with the grammar which stultifies, the
prose or poetical rhythms which bind us
to our pet indolences and medievalisms....
It's the words, the words we need to get
back to, words washed clean. Until we get
the power of thought back through a new

minting of the words we are actually
 sunk. This is a moral question at base,
 surely but a technical one also and
 first. (SE 163)

In Williams' view, form was not merely the language in which an idea was clothed, but was essential to the formulation and communication of the idea. While breaking with the old forms was a problem of technique, for him it was also one which, if solved, could effect a spiritual reawakening. Thus the artist had to adhere to the primary task of devising the necessary form, the "modern replica," with which to articulate his or her idea.

Paterson becomes Williams' "lesson-by-example," his most comprehensive attempt to devise a sufficient form.¹⁵ When the question is posed, in Book One: "There is no direction. Whither?," the poetic persona responds: "I cannot say/more than how. The how (the howl) only/is at my disposal" (I.ii:18). The final shape which the language must assume is not yet clear to the poet, but he knows that it is form to which he must attend.

In his quest for a new form, Williams, like Crane, devised a strategy which includes reworking many

aspects of conventional epic language. For example, Williams relies heavily upon repetition of image and phrase to create a pattern which gives the poem its essential shape. Because his epic consists primarily of a mental journey, it is appropriate that the shape of the narrative is neither linear nor logical but, rather, emulates the loose circularity of the human thought process. Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Paterson freely associates a multitude of ideas which enter his mind as he roams the town. Certain images and phrase motifs reoccur and as they are presented each time in a different context, they take on new meanings. A highly Joycean example of word play concerns the Falls, which represent the raw stream of language over which Paterson is attempting to exert control. From Williams' vignettes, we learn that Sam Patch, a "local hero," attempted to cross the Falls but missed his step and fell to his death. Mrs. Cumming, who stood gazing at the Falls, apparently slipped (or jumped) and went to her death as well. Thus both an heroic figure, who actively undertakes the domination of nature, and Mrs. Cumming, an average citizen, respectively fail and fall to their deaths. Paterson muses about these words and the major changes in meaning brought about by subtle shifts in

form: the Falls occasion their falls and, thus, their failure. He next associates the outcome of their actions with his own plan to contain the Falls and, in doing so, exposes his own fear of failure.

Another set of associations concerns the phrase motif, "So be it!" The origin of the phrase appears to be "Be it so really!," which is listed in the Oxford English Dictionary as an explication of "amen" and further defined as an "expression of concurrence in, or ratification of, a prayer or wish." What previously connoted a feeling of religious fervor becomes in Williams' "So be it!" an acknowledgment of, and even a resignation to, the chaos of the modern era:

Blow! So be it. Bring down! So be it.

Consume

and submerge! So be it. Cyclone, fire

and flood. So be it. Hell, New Jersey,

it said

on the letter. Delivered without comment.

So be it!

Run from it, if you will. So be it.

(Winds that enshroud us in their folds--

or no wind). So be it. Pull at the doors,

of a hot

afternoon, doors that the wind holds,
 wrenches
 from our arms--and hands. So be it. The
 Library
 is sanctuary to our fears. So be it. So
 be it.
 --the wind that has tripped us, pressed
 upon
 us, prurient or upon the prurience of our
 fears
 --laughter fading. So be it.
 (III.i:97)

Yet, in time, the chaos is turned back upon itself.
 Fire, normally thought to be a destructive force, is
 transformed into a cleansing agent and an ally of the
 poet. "So be it!" now becomes the poet's jubilant
 utterance, his non-religious replica for "amen":

All fire afire!

So be it. Swallowing the fire. So be
 it. Torqued to laughter by the fire,
 the very fire. So be it. Chortling at
 flames
 sucked in, a multiformity of laughter, a
 flaming gravity surpassing the sobriety of

flames, a chastity of annihilation. Re-
 creant,
 calling it good. Calling the fire good.
 So be it. The beauty of the fire-blasted
 sand
 that was glass, that was a bottle: unbot-
 tled.

Unabashed. So be it.

(III.ii:117)

Williams' evolutionary reworking of "amen" becomes part of an extended series of word associations. Religion, in the form of Klaus the Evangelist's outworn rhetoric, becomes linked in Paterson's mind with the financial woes of the town, and the religious and economic problems merge in such terms as "defunct" and "bankrupt." Later, when Paterson reflects on Dr. Curie's success in releasing radium from uranium, these pejorative terms are transmuted into "credit":

Money : Joke

....

Curie:woman(of no importance)genius:radium

THE GIST

credit : the gist

(IV.ii:185)

In this new context, credit no longer refers solely to money but takes on a wider range of reference having to do with the enhancement of life. In the concluding passage of the section, the poet explains that

Credit makes solid
is related directly to the effort,
work: value created and received,
"the radiant gist" against all that
scants our lives.

(IV.ii:186)

Williams' belief that the value of the poem to our lives will be in direct relation to the effort of the poet is an extension of his vision of his poetic self as one of the "dirt men" whose artistic labor has more to do with a physical manipulation of the language than with some mystical inspiration. His attitude helps us to understand why he chooses to work with "non-poetic" forms of the language, such as excerpts from historical records, newspaper articles and personal correspondence.

Paterson becomes, to a great extent, an exercise in discovery via the recombination of existing language forms.

As noted earlier, perhaps Williams' most dis-

tinctive technique is his use of juxtapositions, "the effect [of which] is to revive the senses and force them to re-see, re-hear, re-taste, [and] re-smell....By this means poetry has always in the past put a finger upon reality" (SE 27). As Patrick Moore notes, Williams uses paratactical arrangements "to limit, strip logical associations away from words" because they are too restrictive to thought (904). Regarding Williams' specific use of historical records, Michael Bernstein cites Walter Benjamin's thesis that "the function of quotation is to break up the unified, totalitarian blocks that conformist historiography passes out as history." Bernstein goes on to state his belief that the use of quotation "helps to establish the poet's authority as a trustworthy historian, and serves to deflect our tendency to treat his discourse as a purely subjective creation" (274, note a).

However, with his recombinations, which are both scientific and imaginative in the manner of Marie Curie's experiments, Williams does not wish to become the inventor of yet another "frozen" language form. Rather, he is attempting to create an epic language which can remain fluid, that is, open to reinterpretation for as long as possible. In the Prologue to

Kora in Hell, Williams explains that "this loose linking" of disparate elements "give[s] to each the full color of its perfections....On this level of the imagination all things and ages meet in fellowship" (SE 16). James Laughlin better understands Williams' intent when he remarks that Paterson has a "paratactic structure without closure."¹⁶ The purpose of the parataxis is not to give the poet exclusive or final control over the language, but to free up its "radiant gist" so that it has the continuous potential to engender meaning.

Once this purpose is understood, it becomes evident that the disparate pieces which make up the poem are of equal importance in that each may serve as both figure or ground in a given reading. For instance, Cress' attacks on Paterson's integrity expose his weaknesses; yet they also cause Paterson, and the reader, to acknowledge the humanity of the artist, to strip away the gilded image which is suffocating to one who feels himself or herself called upon to perform what may be an impossible task. Williams insists that the poet's frailties be agreed to as a means of "clearing the ground" before there can be any hope of success for the poetic enterprise in the twentieth century.

This egalitarian relationship of the parts of the poem reveals, by extension, that none of these segments is digressive from the main action of the poem. As a modern replica of human consciousness, Williams' epic contains many fragmented ideas and phrases which may appear secondary, as do those fleeting notions which pass through the reader's mind on any given day, but each is essential to reality as we understand it. The poet, in his emulation of the human mind, works by a roundabout method; but after investigating the poem for any length of time, we begin to realize that each word, and the placement of each word upon the page, has a particular function in relation to the poem as a whole. If Paterson is epic in scope, it is due to its ability to contain within its pages the miscellanea of which our lives consist and out of which, Williams insists, must come the meaning of those lives.

In his formulation of an American idiom, Williams' concentrated his efforts on detailing the life of a specific locale, in this case Paterson, New Jersey. It was only by means of the specific illustration that the general instance of life could be chronicled. In the Author's Note to Paterson, Williams states that it is the poet's business "not to talk in vague categories

but to write...upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal," an idea for which he gives credit to John Dewey. Williams' friend and contemporary, Kenneth Burke, explains the rationale of this approach:

We can discuss the basic forms of the human mind under such concepts as crescendo, contrast, comparison, and so on. But to experience them emotionally, we must have them singularized into an example, an example which will be chosen by the artist from among his emotional and environmental experience.

(Counter-Statement 49)

Williams selected Paterson because in addition to offering the everyday occurrences of an American town, it had a documented historical past which included such incidents as Sam Patch's and Mrs. Cumming's encounters with the Passaic Falls and the involvement of Alexander Hamilton in Paterson's economic development. Such events lend themselves to the multiplicity of meaning that Williams was endeavoring to develop. In In the American Grain, Williams remarks that "There is a source in AMERICA for everything we think or do," and

his development of an American idiom was concerned with "asserting" the importance of the local and the particular as the best means by which to articulate universal truths (109).

These assertions involved more than a simple selection and juxtaposition of historical and journalistic accounts. As Brian A. Bremen illustrates in his essay on Williams' use of prose records, Williams poetic manipulations involved changes in and rearrangement of words and the use of ellipsis to alter the rhythm and the voice of these passages to suit his needs.¹⁷

Similarly, the passages of colloquial speech must be regarded as more than a simple transcription of language as Williams overheard it in the street. As James Breslin remarks in a discussion concerning the construction of idiom in Williams' later poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,"

There is a flat, loose, prosaic
quality to the style, but no one in
Rutherford [New Jersey; Williams' home
town] ever spoke sentences like these....
Rather than simply recording American
speech, Williams's style operates at a

level where a flat, discursive, conversational language has been gently pushed, one step upward, toward ritual expression.

(William Carlos Williams: An American Artist 231-2)

Thus colloquial American speech becomes the basis for an artistic reconstruction, one that does not displace the daily usage on which it is founded in that it commands a constant awareness of the significance of ordinary language. Yet it is artistically enhanced in the hope of releasing its inherent value. Bernstein concurs that "Williams' sense of Paterson [was] as a kind of moral-aesthetic obligation to the idiom of his own nation..." (196).

In culling an American idiom from the English language, Williams' felt, as did Whitman, that English was hardy enough to withstand the "branching off" of new languages. In the Autobiography, he recalls giving a lecture in which he remarked that "English, its development from Shakespeare's day to this, does not primarily concern us." When asked where he thought the American idiom came from, if not from English, Williams replied, "From the mouths of Polish mothers" (349). Williams hoped to promote in his work an idiom which, in

effect, revolted against English and took into account the ethnic diversity of voices that exists in the United States and which informs our spoken language.

In sum, Williams' attempt at constructing a new poetic language was a complex matter which involved the careful selection, editing, juxtaposition and spatial arrangement of the languages of the past and the present with the purpose of making them familiar and representative of the world we inhabit yet fresh in their revelation of the "radiant gist" of life. As Williams explains in an essay on writing the short story:

It is, as in all forms of art, taking the materials of every day...and using them to raise the consciousness of our lives to higher aesthetic and moral levels....the elevation of the spirit... occurs when a consciousness of form, art in short, is imposed upon materials debased by dispirited and crassly cynical handling. (SE 295-6)

Yet the problem as Williams defines it concerns the question of "what common language to unravel" [emphasis added] (Paterson I.i:7). It is not the language of the poet but rather the language the poet

hopes to share with the readers for which he quests. In its present form, the language is "A false language pouring--a/language (misunderstood) pouring (misinterpreted) without/dignity, without minister, crashing upon a stone ear." (Paterson I.i:15). Although Williams, in the guise of Paterson, is willing to become the new "minister" to the language, will he be any more effective than Klaus the Evangelist at making the people heed his words? Joel Conarroe astutely remarks concerning Williams' effort:

In his use of the local language, at once natural and resonant, he provides the touchstone by which to separate the gold from the dross. This is a service that only the poet can perform, but that clearly requires the collaboration of an active (even aggressive) audience.

(William Carlos Williams' Paterson: Language and Landscape 138)

In the end, the success of Williams' epic depends upon the capacity of his readers to appreciate his effort. His comprehension of the needs of "the mob" is sufficient motive for constructing a new poetic language but he admits, in Book Five of Paterson, his addi-

tional desire to communicate directly with those whom he seeks to help: "Have you read anything that I have written?/It is all for you," he asks the "nameless woman" whom he sees but does not speak to (V.ii:220). Well over seventy years of age when he published Book Five, Williams continued to wonder if his language experiment had been successful.

Williams' Metapoetic Voice

I noted earlier that Williams and his epic persona, Paterson, accomplish different goals by the end of the poem. Paterson gradually achieves an understanding of his poetic self, in demonstration of Williams' belief that the first task of the poet in the modern age should be the accumulation of self-knowledge. Meanwhile, Williams, writing as a mature poet who possesses such knowledge, works to construct the new idiom. These tasks which the poet and his persona undertake are complementary and fundamental, in Williams' scheme, to the development of a modern poetics. There would be no great discrepancy, therefore, between what the poet tells us via his own actions and through those of his persona if Williams had not later added Book Five to Paterson. With the addition of Book Five, the

question of the poet's relationship to his persona arises, thus making the metapoetic voice in Paterson a more problematic issue.

We find, in the closing lines of Book Four, that the poet and his persona have reached a plateau, a point at which they both pause before moving ahead with their respective journeys. Paterson, who is portrayed as a modern-day Odysseus, emerges from the sea and heads toward home. Spitting his symbolic plum seed onto the beach in hope of planting the Word, he then heads inland--toward Whitman's Paumonok and the "originality" which all great American explorers, such as Columbus, DeSoto and Poe, have achieved. Similarly, the poet has planted the "seed" of his epic and will continue on his self-appointed quest of articulating his homeland.

The penultimate stanza of Book Four might pose a problem as Williams could be suggesting here that Paterson's confident gestures occur in a dream. If the first line of the stanza, which reads in part "--must have slept. Got up again," does indeed indicate a dream-state, however, it does not undercut Paterson's actions. Rather, it reinforces our knowledge of this poet as one who aspires to imaginative greatness yet simultaneously lives in fear of failure (IV.iii:203). Fulfillment is

"only/a dream or in a dream" we have been told (IV.iii:191). Therefore, it is a moot point whether Paterson's actions are real or merely projections of his desire, for the poet tells us he has come to believe that "La Vertue est toute dans l'effort"; that is, the virtue comes from the poet's attempt to heal the dissociated consciousness, whether that effort finds success in a real world or an imagined one (IV.iii:189).

In the closing stanza of Book Four, Williams makes his final reply to Eliot's challenge. These lines seem to be more a direct response to Eliot's "Hollow Men," in which the world ends "not with a bang but a whimper," than The Waste Land. Yet they respond as well to Eliot's ultimate vision in The Waste Land of an earthly world which can only be poorly "shored up" by the poet. In contrast, Williams' poem closes with:

This is the blast
the eternal close
the spiral
the final somersault

the end.

Williams replaces Eliot's "whimpering" and "ruined" mortality with the strong "blast" of a poem which has no end. It spirals, it somersaults, it closes eternally;

and, in doing so, it perpetuates itself. As Roy Harvey Pearce remarks concerning this ending:

There can be no 'finished product.' Such knowledge torments Paterson, but also delights him; for he is thrown back (somersaulted, in Williams' closing words) upon himself and his heroic ability to live with disunity, even as he longs for unity. (The Continuity of American Poetry 121)

Pearce addresses himself to Paterson's outcome, but Williams' position at the end of Book Four is comparable to that of his hero. The persona and the poet have both "somersaulted inland"; they have become self-reliant and more assured concerning their vision of America.

Thus there would have been little discrepancy between poet and persona if Williams had not gone on to add a fifth Book to his epic. Williams' original intent was to write only four Books and an explanation of that project is contained in the Author's Note to the poem. After completing Book Four, Williams composed, among other pieces, an extended lyric poem that he intended to use as part of a projected fifth Book for Paterson. Though he subsequently published this poem as "Asphodel,

"That Greeny Flower" in 1955, it seems clear that Williams now conceived of Paterson as a project that could not be contained within his original prospectus.

In the fifth Book, Williams presents a new persona, one who has assumed the mantle of old age. This figure views his work as almost finished and sets out to assess his accomplishments over the course of a lifetime. Unlike the voyager of the first four Books, this persona speaks from a knowledge of what has come to pass; but far more jarring is our realization that this persona is almost indistinguishable from the poet. Gone are the accentuated elements of character, most notably the picaresque features, with which Williams instilled his earlier persona. The distance is now collapsed between the "implied author" and the "immediate teller," to use Wayne Booth's terms, until we sense that we are being exposed directly to the voice of the poet without any mediation by the fictive hero he established in the previous Books.

Although Williams intended Book Five to be co-equal with the earlier Books of Paterson, this becomes an impossibility due to the change in the nature of the speakers. Implicit in the vision of this second speaker is an understanding of the world which Books One

through Four have articulated. Moreover, this speaker takes the perspective of a poet who is removed from the almost war-like engagement with the world to which the active poet is committed. For this reason, Book Five actually functions, in part, as a coda to the epic in its summative reflection upon many of the earlier themes.

While the speaker in Book Five mentions his fear of "the bomb," which would inform the work of a later generation of poets, his main concern is with what has happened to art since the time of his apprenticeship. Early in Book One of Paterson he revealed the role which art plays in his life: "Why have I not/but for imagined beauty where there is none/or none available, long since/put myself deliberately in the way of death?" (I.ii:20). "Imagined beauty" has been the driving force of his existence and thus we find him ecstatically announcing in Book Five that his faith in art has been confirmed over time:

A WORLD OF ART
THAT THROUGH THE YEARS HAS

SURVIVED!

(Paterson V.i:209)

And, as an older poet who has also found some personal satisfaction through his work, he announces "I, Paterson, the King-self/saw the lady" (V.iii:234).

Though Williams believed, with some justification, that his work was generally underrated during his lifetime, his poetic self was triumphant: he had breathed life into "imagined beauty" and been witness to the endurance of art through a most difficult period.

However, after he makes these declarations early in the fifth Book, Williams alternates between two main tasks in the remainder of Book Five: crafting loving "replicas" of great art works, such as the Unicorn tapestries and the works of Peter Brueghel, the Elder; and questioning the limits of the individual artist's ability. After the strong closure of the poem at the end of Book Four, this introduction of new themes, combined with the time which elapsed between the steady publication of the original four Books (1946, 1948, 1949 and 1951, respectively) and the arrival of Book Five (1958), resulted in a response to the enlarged work which, in general, has not been favorable.

Some critics, finding themselves uncomfortable with the fifth Book, have chosen to set it apart or ignore it completely in their discussions of Paterson

as if it were a mistake on Williams' part to have published it.¹⁸ However, Walter Sutton confronts the issue head on when he remarks in his essay "Dr. Williams's Paterson and the Quest for Form" that either "the conception of Paterson as a poem or the conception of achieved poetic form as a completely-integrated and inviolable whole" must give way (242). Sutton concludes that "Poetic form, accordingly, is tentative and relative" (244). Louis L. Martz is in substantial agreement with Sutton when he comments:

If only we had [the first] three books of Paterson, I believe that we would have a sense of almost perfect accomplishment, in a poem that with all its variety holds together with a dominant symbolism and a soaring climax. But clearly, Williams did not wish to end with such an effect. (519)

Not only does Williams move beyond the ecstatic moment of triumph which marked the conclusion of the epic in the older Romantic tradition, as Hart Crane had also done, but he introduces a persona late in the work who is "inconsistent" with the persona of the earlier Books if we use as our standard of measure the portrayal of

the hero in earlier epics. It appears that the aging Williams, though he continues to express despair over the limits of his poetic abilities, has taken another major risk in the fifth Book by employing a persona who is highly autobiographical and whose point of view is retrospective.

This persona becomes the stumbling block for those readers who have difficulty with the enlarged epic, but it need not be. Williams' strategy brings to mind the remarks of one of his contemporaries, D.H. Lawrence, who stated, regarding poetry of the "immediate present," "Do not ask for the qualities of the unfading timeless gems. Ask for the whiteness which is the seethe of the mud..." (Preface to the American edition of New Poems 71). In his work, it was Williams' intention to be one of those authors, such as Lawrence and Joyce, who risked everything for their art, including public criticism for a failure of technique.

Yet Lawrence, like Williams, would not have viewed the discrepancy between the persona of Books One through Four and that of Book Five as a failure. He explains that

The poetry of the instant present cannot
have the same body or the same motion

as the poetry of the before or after.

It can never submit to the same conditions. It is never finished. (Preface to the American edition of New Poems 72)

At least one current critic would agree with Lawrence's assessment. Anne Janowitz, in discussing Williams' decision to add Book Five to Paterson, remarks that the completion of the poem then becomes a relative matter: if the relation between parts is good, and if it delivers the goods, then it is successful. The Paterson invention... works smoothly or it breaks down; it is useful or it isn't; it succeeds or it doesn't; but it rarely concludes.... (307)

And, in fact, at the time of his death, Williams left behind some notes for a proposed sixth Book. It seems fair to state, based on his actions, that Williams conceived of Paterson as an on-going project which would have lost its integrity only if he had not continued to utilize it as a field of action.

Williams' work was always informed by a sense of the need to "clear the ground" at any cost. In the early 1930s, he explained in a letter to Kay Boyle, that

they were living in a "pre-masterly period":

It is a period without mastery, that is all. It is a period in which the form has not yet been found. It is a formative time whose duty it is to bare the essentials, to shuck away the hulls, to lay open at last the problems with open eyes. (SL 133)

In holding to this point of view, Williams remained free to explore and to err, having relieved himself of the pressure to work toward a finished style or the creation of an epic that would claim to be the definitive response to the modern dilemma. Benjamin Sankey agrees that the period during which Williams lived and worked called for "a form of quarrying, of preparing the language for poets to come" (6). Williams also concerned himself with the preservation of "things of 'little importance' [which] may be more valuable--as it is more difficult and more the business of the writer--than to champion a winner" (In the American Grain 76)

Perhaps Williams' greatest challenge was converting the destructive force of his fear of failure into a denial of despair as a response to that other "King-self," Eliot, and the latter poet's vision of the

ineffectiveness of art. Williams commented on poetic failure in a letter to Henry Wells:

The poem to me (until I go broke) is an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, toward assertion with broken means but an assertion, always, of a new and total culture, the lifting of the environment to expression. Thus it is social, the poem is a social instrument--accepted or not accepted seems to be of no material importance....If I am faulty in knowledge or skill it is of small matter so long as I follow the ball. (SL 286)

In "Asphodel," Williams again introduced the theme of the poem as a failing experiment: "I lived/to breathe above the stench/not knowing it in my own person/would be overcome/finally. I was lost/failing the poem"

(60). These lines offer an excellent illustration of Williams' ability to force the Word to yield up a variety of meanings, even directly-opposing ones.

"Failing," the great motif in Book One of Paterson, connotes in "Asphodel" both the poet's lack of success with regard to his work and, conversely, his salvation through art. The poet knowingly continues to engage in

the act of creation although every word exposes his flawed mortality. Yet it is via the imagination that the artist escapes death: "Through this hole/at the bottom of the cavern/of death, the imagination/escapes intact." (Paterson V.i:212).

Williams also reveals in the fifth Book that while the imaginative spirit may be endless, the human body has become frail. The older persona of Book Five finally acknowledges that "No one mind/can do it all," an admission which paves the way for the passing of the poet-hero's mantle to the poets of the next generation. And this is perhaps the most significant aspect of Book Five with respect to the epic as a whole: the idea of poetic succession. Williams' persona, responding to the letter which "A.G.," has sent to him, remarks that this younger poet can receive "courage from an older man who stands ready to help him" (V.iii:231). With the memory of Whitman as his poetic progenitor, Williams is now ready to become "pater" to a new generation of poetic "sons," though, in actuality, the group includes several "daughters" as well.

This group of successors to the early Modernist poets is represented in Paterson by the figure of A.G., based upon the real-life poet Allen Ginsberg who

shares Williams'--and Whitman's--desire to articulate the American experience. Thus the "seed" which the poet sets at the end of Book Four now comes to represent not only his own work but also the body of work to come from the next group of poets. A world of art has not simply survived, Williams tells us in Book Five; it retains the ability to perpetuate itself. The poet's devotion to the present has enabled him in old age to project hope for the future of art and for society.

This is not to say that Williams expected Allen Ginsberg's poetry, or that of any of his successors, to be imitative of his own. For as his epic illustrates, change is the key element in the development of a poetry suitable for its age. Modernists such as Whitman and Williams construed the making of poems as an on-going process of readjustment and re-creation of form that should be judged, primarily, on its ability to take risks in aid of formulating an art that would answer the needs of the time.

Paterson has a difficult form, particularly with Williams' addition of the fifth Book, but overall it is a form that is sufficient for the needs of modern society. As Rosenthal and Gall state:

We are not claiming that Paterson's

every little shred and patch of colorful exclamation, prose quotation, or whatever, is necessarily superb--only that the work is actively structured in a demanding way. (238)

But, as Joel Conarroe noted, the Modernist poem calls for an audience that is alert and even aggressive to make the imaginative act a successful experience. Williams' epic has not as yet been widely realized because it has not found its audience; however, it carries in it the potential to succeed, not only on the basis of its own merit but because, like Whitman's Leaves of Grass, it has become a source-work for the succeeding generation.

Notes

¹ William Carlos Williams, "To Elsie" in Spring and All, reprinted in The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams (NY: New Directions, 1951): 270-272.

² William Carlos Williams, The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (NY: Random House, 1951). Future references will be cited parenthetically in the text as the Autobiography.

³ William Carlos Williams, Paterson (NY: New Directions, 1963): Book I, section iii, page 37. Future quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text by book, section and page number, e.g., I.iii:37.

⁴ Letter to Horace Gregory, dated May 9, 1944, from The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams, ed. John C. Thirlwall (NY: New Directions, 1957). Future references will be cited parenthetically in the text as SL.

⁵ "The Poem as a Field of Action" in William Carlos Williams, The Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams (NY: Random House, 1954): 285. Future references to these essays will be cited parenthetically in the text as SE.

⁶ William Carlos Williams, "An Approach to the

Poem," English Institute Essays (NY: Columbia UP, 1948): 65.

7 Walt Whitman, "Slang in America," Complete Poetry and Collected Prose (NY: The Library of America, 1982): 1165.

8 "[The poem] is an engine that needs continual redesigning in each period of the world so as to increase its capacity...." W.C. Williams, "An Approach to the Poem," 53.

9 W.C. Williams, "An Approach to the Poem," 56.

10 Joel Conarroe comments that Williams states his intention, in a note found among his papers in the Beinecke Library at Yale University, to make certain parts of Paterson "as completely formal as possible" and juxtapose them against "unfinished pieces" which have "immediacy of expression...--or for their need to be just there, the information." See Joel Conarroe, "A Local Pride: The Poetry of Paterson," PMLA 84 (May 1969): 553 and footnote 31.

11 See "Père Sebastian Rasles" in William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain (1925; NY: New Directions, 1956): 113.

12 William Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads in William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Gill

(Oxford UP, 1984): 604.

13 Kenneth Burke, "William Carlos Williams, 1883-1963," reprinted in J. Hillis Miller, ed., William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966): 51.

14 Roy Harvey Pearce notes that "Celebration of the perceiving self has been for some thirty years William Carlos Williams' stock-in-trade." See "The Poet as Person," Yale Review 49 (Spring 1952): 430.

15 Robert Pinsky remarks that the characteristic strength of Williams' art derives from the fact that his poems "were conscious lessons-by-example...." See Review of The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume One: 1909-1939, eds. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, New York Times Book Review (January 4, 1987): 3.

16 James Laughlin, Williams' long-time friend and editor, made this remark in his taped interview for the Williams' segment of the Voices and Visions series aired on the Public Broadcasting Network in Spring, 1988.

17 See Brian A. Bremen, "'The Radiant Gist': 'The Poetry Hidden in the Prose' of Williams' Paterson," Twentieth Century Literature 32 (Summer

1986): 221-241, especially 226, note 15 for an excellent example of Williams' manipulation of material through ellipsis.

¹⁸ See, for example, James Breslin who in William Carlos Williams: An American Artist does not consider Book Five in his discussion of Paterson because he believes it can "best be examined alongside the poetry of Williams's last period," with which Breslin deals in a separate chapter. Also Stephen Tapscott who, in his essay "Whitman in Paterson," analyzes the end of Paterson in terms of the closing stanzas of Book Four (291ff).

CHAPTER V

DIANE WAKOSKI'S GREED

"The descent beckons
as the ascent beckoned.
memory is a kind
of accomplishment,
a sort of renewal
even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are
new places
inhabited by hordes
heretofore unrealized"

--William Carlos Williams

Diane Wakoski (b. 1937) is one of William Carlos Williams' heirs; yet it was not Williams, but Wordsworth who had an early influence of the shape of her work.¹ Wakoski found in Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads a model in which the spoken language served as the basis for a new poetic idiom. Wakoski remarks that Wordsworth was searching for a poetic language which was "simultaneously unusual and common" and the basis of the language, which lay in prose speech, is best represented, not in his poems but,

rather, in the Preface which is written "in his own voice" (UIC Lecture). As Wakoski notes, Wordsworth was struggling in the Preface with the Modernist concept of "prose prosody," or how to reveal the poetic aspect of the common language (Personal Interview). Wordsworth himself remarks in the Preface, "some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose, when prose is well written."² The use of prose speech as the basis for a new poetic idiom would become an important feature of Wakoski's style.

Wakoski was also struck by Wordsworth's ability to "put together passion and the language that turns it into literature and makes it endure." The idea of "emotion recollected in tranquillity," which Wordsworth voiced in the Preface, became Wakoski's goal in formulating her "personal narratives," as she chooses to call her poetical works (Personal Interview). Although Wakoski's body of work has been dismissed for, among other reasons, being the simple recording of raw emotion, in actuality Wakoski has followed Wordsworth's dictum to think "long and deeply" in order to transform those "powerful feelings" into art.³ In "An Essay on Revision," for example, Wakoski stresses that it is "the

slow process of revision [that] will make the poem better, rather than just different."⁴

A third significant feature of Wordsworth's poetry was its revelation of secrets. Wakoski points to Wordsworth's liaison with Annette Vallon, who subsequently bore Wordsworth's child, as the "guilty secret" which lies at the core of Wordsworth's long poem, The Prelude. His oblique treatment of this affair in Book IX, Wakoski believes, is synecdochic of the poetic act. "Poems need big secrets," she explains. A poem is "a disguise. The reader must feel that he can discover what is in the "box" and, further, "he wants that secret to mean something in his own life" (UIC Lecture).

A similar idea is expressed by Charles Olson in his essay "Projective Verse," which, along with Wordsworth's Preface and The Prelude, has served as Wakoski's "manifesto" over the years (UIC Lecture and Personal Interview). In discussing the poet's relationship to the world, Olson remarks:

But if [the poet] stays inside himself,
...he will be able to listen, and his
hearing through himself will give him
secrets objects share....It is in this

sense that the projective act [i.e., the creation of "projective" verse], which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man. (25)

Wakoski, like Olson--and Williams, who incorporated most of Olson's essay into his own Autobiography--views the artist as both a common and superior actor in the "field of action" which constitutes our world. The poet reveals his or her particular experience in poetic form with the hope of forming what Wakoski calls a "reciprocal" relationship with the poem's reader. The poet's superiority comes from the more finely attuned soul which Wordsworth ascribed to the poet. Yet, in the end, the "secret" which the poet reveals must reflect the experience shared by all human beings or there can be no reciprocity. As Olson remarks, the composition of the poem becomes a means of promoting that recognition ("Projective Verse" 20).

Wakoski's emphasis on "unravelling" the secret as a means of achieving a reciprocal relationship with the reader points to her primary concern with the form which the poetic work takes. She, like Crane and Williams, is attempting through her work to provide a

formal structure which "makes new" the truth and beauty inherent in our common lives. In accomplishing this renewal of perception, Wakoski concentrates on expressing the innermost thoughts and feelings of the self, some of which lie so deeply buried in the psyche that we feel some discomfort when the poet uncovers them.

These "taboo" subjects, which perhaps pose the final barrier to a comprehensive understanding of the human character, were previously investigated by such poets as Whitman and Williams. In Whitman's "The Sleepers" and "I Sing the Body Electric" and Williams' "Danse Russe," for example, these poets explore the homo- and auto-erotic yearnings latent in all human beings. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, Wakoski is able to explore other taboo subjects, such as female sexuality and anger at male domination. Like her literary predecessors, she is willing to risk creating a poetry which may initially appear threatening to the reader in her attempt to make her work responsive to the needs of her age.

The poetic voice which she employs is one of the "taboo" aspects of Wakoski's poetry. Because her speakers are often thought to be synonymous with their

flesh-and-blood author, Wakoski has been grouped with such poets as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath who are said to write "confessional" poetry. It is not my intention here to judge the appropriateness of this label with regard to the work of other poets; however, it is my belief that this labeling of her work as "confessional" has caused considerable misreading of Wakoski's poetry. Wakoski has herself been careful to define her work as the development of a "personal narrative," a technique which, she explains, she has inherited from Whitman and Dickinson, both of whom possessed "the ability to create a personal mythology out of autobiography" ("A Response to Frederick Turner" 181). Like all artists, Wakoski's work is grounded in personal experience; however, it is not necessarily autobiographical. Rather, the construction of a persona so immediate and so "real" that it is thought to be autobiographical is evidence of a formal strategy that works in that it finds a way to engage the twentieth-century reader in the poetic act.

While Wakoski's poetry is not confessional, it is, as she terms it, "psychologically personal" in its focus on the intimate details of the speaker's life. Such intimate psychological revelation has itself been

considered an inappropriate, or taboo, subject for poetry and is, in part, the reason for Wakoski's selection of it as the subject for her poetry.

Wakoski's choosing to artistically portray an individual's feelings and emotions appears to be in direct opposition to Eliot's declaration, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (43). However, it should be remembered that Wakoski is not spontaneously recording raw emotions but, rather, carefully planning and editing her poetic rendering of human feeling. Her choice of language, tone and proximity to her reader are as calculated as Whitman's poetic "personalism" and, if examined carefully, will reveal their artifice. Moreover, contemporary criticism has begun to view the so-called "objective" style which Eliot championed as having more in the common with the "subjective" mode of presentation than was previously thought. As Marjorie Perloff explains:

we can see that Modernist 'objectivity' or 'impersonality' was no more than an extreme version of the interiority it

claimed to reject. (178)

When Wakoski's "transparent" works are examined with a critical eye, it becomes apparent that while her poetic strategy may be disturbing, it is no less a thoughtful artistic fabrication than "objective" poetry.

Wakoski is also an heir to Whitman in that she construes her speaker to be representative of the American people. Like Whitman, Wakoski views herself as residing in the midst of American society by virtue of the fact that her "guilty secret," which she cites as "being from the lower classes," makes her an integral part of that society (UIC Lecture). As Carole Ferrier notes, what distinguishes Wakoski's work from "the work of poets like Plath or Sexton, is the fact that much of it comes out of a working class consciousness" (111). Perceiving herself to be a typical member of American society, Wakoski feels confident in expressing her poetic task with regard to her long poem, Greed (1968-84), as the desire "to talk about American culture and my own relationship to it in terms of my own sense of morality and of human values, which I think is one of the functions of the poet" (Petroski 40).

An example of her search for an identity that is both an individual and a societal one concerns her use

of George Washington in her poetry as a symbol of her own desire for a father and in his fulfillment of the desire of society for a "usable past." Wakoski's treatment of George Washington is strongly reminiscent of Williams' employment of various historical figures in In the American Grain and Paterson, and her commentary on the use of history as justifiable material for art could just as easily be attributed to Williams.⁵ She states:

It would be very easy for me to read a million books on George Washington and write historically accurate poems that would be boring to me and everyone else... I didn't feel that's what our tradition is about. It's a personal tradition rather than a historical tradition.... And yet at the same time,....I certainly don't think the purpose of poetry is to violate history. I think it's to transcend it, to learn from it, and imagine out of it rather than being pulled down.

(Musher 311)

In Greed 12, for example, we find Wakoski's modern-day persona meeting George Washington, of whom she remarks:

I had always felt in the past that my George Washington should be placed in the West, given a life in a hot country, that so much of his history was corrupted and repressed with geographic strictures.

After all, as a young man he had become a surveyor precisely because he needed new territory and land of his own.⁶

Thus Wakoski, in the guise of her persona, meets "the father of her country" in a locale which she believes will allow him to become a viable heroic model for the contemporary era.

With her focus in Greed on the western United States, Wakoski physically extends the work of Whitman, Dickinson and Williams in whose poetry we find America represented, for the most part, by the eastern seaboard. Wakoski, a Californian by birth, views the American West as providing the suitable ground for American poetry as it moves into the twenty-first century. However, she has not abandoned the East in her artistic reworking of our collective history. She conflates East with West, and the historical past with the present (e.g., placing George Washington in the modern-day Nevada desert), in order to create a fiction "which will suffice."

As an heir to and extender of the poetic vision of Whitman and Williams, Wakoski is best categorized as a second-generation Modernist. She includes herself among those poets whose work upholds "the Whitmanian tradition in the 1980s" by invoking a democratic vision, concentrating on the development of a common language, gravitating toward taboo subjects and in "claiming our personal quests as heroic ones" (UIC Lecture).

In Greed, Wakoski expands upon many of the central concerns of her earlier works, as well as experimenting with additional themes and generic forms. She released four volumes of poetry before publishing Greed: Parts 1 and 2 in 1968. Her original plan called for an additional two sections to complete the work, and, after printing four more volumes of poetry, she published Greed: Parts 3 and 4 in 1969. Realizing that she was not finished with her epic poem, she continued to released various sections (Parts 5-7 in 1971; Parts 8, 9 and 11 in 1973) and, finally, issued The Collected Greed: Parts 1-13 in 1984.

Although Wakoski is a poet of the 1970s and 1980s, it is not difficult to distinguish her poetry from contemporary work which has been labeled "Post-modern." As Todd Gitlin comments in his essay on

Post-modernism, where Modernism might be characterized by its presentation of multiple voices and perspectives and its tendency to illustrate the ambiguous and complex nature of reality through the technique of narrative fragmentation and linguistic juxtaposition, Post-modernism is indifferent to consistency and inconsistency: "It neither embraces nor criticizes, but beholds the world blankly, with a knowingness that dissolves feeling and commitment into irony" (35). Further, Post-modernism "confesses (or celebrates!) helplessness" while Modernism presents a "series of declarations of faith" (36). Diane Wakoski illustrates in her long poem, Greed, that she is of the Modernist party in terms of her perception of reality and the goals of her formal technique, which include a forceful declaration of faith in the potential of the human being to respond to the dilemma of the modern age.

The Heroic Ideal in "Greed"

In her epic quest, the speaker in Greed undertakes an investigation of those innermost thoughts and feelings which, though acknowledged only with great difficulty by the conscious self, comprise the basis of our psychic life. The goal of this introspective

journey is not a private one; the poet is not hoping to provoke a "shock of recognition" through the medium of her art that will aid her in "finding" herself. Rather, she hopes, by making public her own "taboo" thoughts, to open a dialogue with her readers concerning unexplored aspects of the universal self. In Greed 4, for instance, the speaker asks:

How many of us are born
as intruders,
ugly noisy holes
to be plugged?

. . . .

anyone of us who spent his first years
as an intruder
will spend his life trying to overcome
the feeling
that nothing belonged to him;

(47)

In offering an example which stems from her own sense of being in the world, Wakoski is not confessing personal woes but, instead, invoking Emerson's dictum: "Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense." For Wakoski, the mysteries of the psyche, those

"secrets" which our conscious mind labels "taboo," provide not the material of confession but the deepest and most urgent connection between human beings. It is not "Diane" alone who quests for self-understanding; it is every individual who feels the turmoil of the dissociated self. These "intruders," among whom the speaker includes herself, are those people who have been born into a world from which they feel disengaged and for whom the quest of selfhood is, in large part, an attempt to overcome this feeling of displacement.

In seeking a remedy for this dissociation, Wakoski perceives the artist as functioning "as a kind of archaeologist" who, as Williams explains in Paterson 2, descends into memory as the likely site of renewal "since the spaces it opens are...inhabited by hordes heretofore unrealized" (Introduction to The Man Who Shook Hands 9). In Greed, this journey is signalled by the phrase motif "What happened?" Wakoski's speaker asks:

What happened?

We have as hard a time telling
as if there were no words.

Each voice tells articulately
its own story.

Nowhere

do they come together;

(Greed 2:25)

Wakoski, like Williams, is careful in her selection and placement of words which, in this instance, exemplify by their dullness and their sluggish movement the problem she is addressing. There is a lack of ability to "come together," Wakoski tells us, not only with others but with the various aspects of one's own self.

The question motif "What happened?" not only introduces the problem of dissociated consciousness, but also provides the occasion for a response in the form of an "unravelling" narrative. The telling of the story is the essence of the poetic art for Wakoski who illustrates in the following example just how "slippery" events can become when one attempts to give voice to them. In response to the query "What happened?," the speaker tells us, in Greed 5:

I gave up my children when I was young

....

I gave up my children so they could have
better parents

and not have to suffer poverty.

I gave up my children so that I could have

all my time and
energy to be a person/a poet.

....

None of you will understand this.

Unless you have divested yourself of
sentimentality. (60-61)

However, several passages later, the speaker offers a
second version of what happened:

I am not noble.

I am not strong.

I did not give up my children for goodness;

but

because I was helpless,

crushed, stupid,

bloody, weak. (66)

When Wakoski presents us with this second
version of the story, we may try to reconcile them.
However, we remain unsure of their relative "truth"
until the speaker adds, near the end of Part 5:

Pain

pain

pain.

If I say it again and again, will the pain
like sediment in the water

clear away

and leave me with a story I can understand?

A reality I can ----

(67)

It now becomes clear that the purpose in presenting two versions of "what happened" is not primarily to ask us to determine the extent to which either one of them is true but, rather, to point out the need that the speaker--and each of us--has to somehow resolve our identity, to formulate a "story" which will ground us firmly in the world. The poet's inclusion of an open-ended statement at the end of the passage further engages her readers in the poetic quest by urging them to complete the line, i.e., it encourages them to think about the shape life's narrative must take in order to satisfy their needs.

Portraying the individual as an intruder in the world is part of Wakoski's larger theme of loss and betrayal which she utilizes in Greed and other poems to create her primary dramatic tension. Her narratives frequently involve the betrayal of a woman by a man; however, the tenor of these poems concerns the need for resolution of the conflict between opposing aspects of the individual psyche. Like Williams, Wakoski utilizes

imbibers of rich edibles.

Power.

(129)

It is the poet who leads the way by trying to make us realize that language is "rich food," that it fuels us as we work toward self-comprehension and a reconciliation of our conflicting inner voices.

As Wakoski construes it, reconciliation takes the form, not of hierarchically ranking or of conflating the disparate elements of our personal narratives, but of balancing them. Citing Wordsworth's poetry as the source of her own discovery of this principle, Wakoski explains:

for me it was important that Wordsworth provided a balance. I was looking for all that pain and rage and frustration [in his work] because that's the way I perceived the handling of my secret and what I found was that he was handling his secret via a sense of beauty. (Personal Interview)

The balance between the real and the desirable, between "the natural ugliness the world imposes upon us" and

our need for beauty becomes Wakoski's primary goal as a poet (Healey 10).

In her quest to balance her sense of loss and dissociation with some "imagined beauty," Wakoski reveals her link to the American romantic tradition and her direct descendance from Whitman. As James E. Miller, Jr. explains of Whitman's poetry, "What Whitman saw in his own place and time did inspire his poetry; his disillusionment and indignation with the reality spurred him on to sketch, in his poetry, the ideal and the possibilities of its realization" (The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction 48). The only option the poet has is to tell the story in such a way as to reveal the potential for beauty. As Wakoski remarks, "We use what we have as well as what we fight against" (Personal Interview).

Like Crane and Williams, Wakoski believes that beauty does not exist apart from the "blood factory," as she terms it. It is the body which is fundamental to the life of the mind and from which the imaginative faculty mysteriously--and miraculously--emanates. Therefore, the demands of physical existence must be borne if we are to have the possibility of experiencing beauty. Further, the burden of physical life informs

our understanding of beauty; it is the ground against which we perceive it. In "How do you tell a story?," the poetic persona commits herself to "narrating" the life of the body as well as that of the mind:

I will be brave, then, too.

and tell you I am moved by two things:

beauty

and injustice.⁷

Beauty and injustice have been key terms throughout Wakoski's poetic career. They represent the extremes which life offers in the same way that joy and despair are employed by Crane in his work. In one of her earliest published poems, "Justice Is Reason Enough," the poet tells us:

Justice is

reason enough for anything ugly. It balances

the beauty in the

world.⁸

It is this balanced perception for which the poet continuously strives.

This declaration that balance should be our goal is not a unique or startling revelation; it is perhaps best thought of as the telling of an old truth in such a way as to make it valid again. And this is the essence

of Wakoski's art: not the discovery of something new but the "unravelling" of what has already been known so that it may be recovered. It is the use of "composition to promote recognition," of which Olson speaks in "Projective Verse," that is Wakoski's artistic objective. In Greed 5, the persona tells us:

I want to chronicle this story.
 I have not told it before.
 I wonder
 if it is a story everyone knows?
 (64)

The answer which the poem seeks to elicit from the reader is "Yes." It is Wakoski's hope that she can orchestrate the telling in such a way that the reader will become involved to the point of recognizing the story as one we all share. Thus she concentrates her efforts on the form which the story takes. As Kenneth Burke remarks in a discussion of dramatic form:

Where the psychology of form is emphasized, we have not surprise but disclosure....It is the suspense of certain forces gathering to produce a certain result....Our satisfaction arises from

our participation in the process....

(Counter-statement 145).

Thus such personal narratives as Greed allow a process of recognition to take place during which the reader understands the poem to be a shared experience. The poet voices her innermost thoughts, not to "confess" her pain or loss, but to aid in the healing process through the evocation of the beauty which balances the injustice. Wakoski is careful, however, to make a distinction between therapy and poetry. She explains that "even though poetry is an act of healing, when it is practiced as therapy, it often stops being an art" (TNP 141).

For Wakoski, the poem works if its form successfully conveys to the reader the significant role which our emotions and desires play in our lives, and, further, if the reader comprehends that the life of the psyche is a key to our identity and should not be repressed. In a society such as ours where the emotional self is denied in favor of a more rational one, the poet has difficulty establishing a reciprocal relationship with her reader due to her wish to discuss such a "taboo" subject. At one point in Greed, the speaker laments:

Why is it
 so hard to give
 real
 art
 to the world?
 (13:243)

Yet the poet, as her own heroic model, wishes to affirm life, not to confess its pain. Wakoski persists in the poetic task, even when fear and frustration assault her and a lack of reciprocity with her readers becomes difficult to bear. Her persona states this position clearly in Greed 9, "The Water Element Song for Sylvia," which considers the despair that drove Sylvia Plath to commit suicide:

I can/I will survive
 whether the man I love, who makes me calm
 on a windy day,
 goes away or not.

....

If he goes, her life does not go,
 but it becomes a book with none of the
 pages in the right order.

....

because I want to believe

this pain & suffering have meant something,
 that I can inspire someone to love me
 long and faithfully,
 and that my words, my life, may give someone
 else
 courage to go on. (110, 111, 118)

The desirable balance may cease to exist, as it often
 does in life, but the poet remains committed to her
 attempt to re-establish a necessary order. And that
 continuous striving toward balance is her act of poetic
 heroism.

The Role of Language in "Greed"

As did her predecessors, Wakoski works con-
 sciously with generic form, including those features of
 epic discussed earlier in this study. And like the
 first-generation Modernists, she chooses to rework the
 established forms for, as she explains, "there are only
 a few forms, so often you have to make a ritual gesture
 of breaking the old forms in order to absolutely re-
 establish them..." (Smith 297). Wakoski's "reestab-
 lishment" of certain features involves a transformation
 which might make them unrecognizable; nevertheless, they
 are highly conscious of and refer back to those earlier

forms.

Wakoski employs repetition, for example, as a means of calling attention to and purposely "wearing out" trite emotionalism. The poetic refrain in Greed 9 illustrates her strategy:

I wont wont wont
die,
even for poetry. (110 ff.)

These repetitions, which sometimes employ non-standard punctuation, are meant to strip away the sentimentality which such statements convey by exploiting our awareness of them as overused expressions. Wakoski was influenced by Gertrude Stein in her use of repetition for this purpose, and, unfortunately, like Stein, she sometimes fails to achieve her desired effect.

Wakoski employs repetition, as well as parataxis, with greater success as a means of giving shape to the fragmented narrative. She is able to provide not only an identifiable structure but also to indicate the relative importance of particular sections of the narrative through their repetition. Emphasizing certain passages by means of repetition is a simple but highly effective method of guiding the reader through the lengthy and fragmented poem.

Although the narrative in Greed is fragmented like the narratives in The Bridge and Paterson, it does not present a sequence of montages to render the "stream of consciousness" of human thought as these earlier poems do. As a second-generation Modernist, Wakoski finds stream of consciousness to be a conventionalized form and looks, instead, to digression as a primary structural feature for her long poem.

Wakoski's heavy reliance on digression to shape Greed links her epic to those of the classical period, such as the Iliad and the Aeneid. She is concerned, first, with giving breadth to her work by presenting "variations" on the narrative theme which comment upon one another in the way that musical variations enlarge upon a central motive.⁹ She remarks concerning her use of this technique:

This is what digression is. It's not moving ahead and getting you to the completion point....associatively, it moves on to a different 'narrative,' if you want to use that term; you get the possibility of bigger kinds of interpretation....breadth of interpretation.

(Personal Interview)

Digression also works in Greed, as in classical epic, as a means of providing an interesting form for a story that is known to the audience. The experiences that comprise Wakoski's personal narratives are already known to us; they are the events of which our own lives consist. Like the tales told in the classical epics, they are not new; therefore, they are in need of an extraordinary poetic form, one that will hold the reader's attention. The digressive episodes in Greed are Wakoski's attempt to find a means of reinventing poetic form so that the narrative will once again become compelling to the reader.

Convinced that the material we need to construct our identities, and thus give meaning to our existence, is embedded in the circumstances of our daily lives, Wakoski proceeds, by digressive means, to make us discover, first, our "subject matter," that is, the felt life inherent in our everyday experience, and then the significance of that subject matter. Where once we sought to discover some universal experience that would unify us in our outlook and provide a collective identity, Wakoski looks to our individual experience as the basis for our spiritual unification. She remarks that there is a lack of a "common problem" or "pool of cul-

tural secrets" which would provide a core identity in the modern age (UIC Lecture). Thus, she "wraps up" her personal narratives as secrets which are then slowly revealed to the reader. In Greed, Wakoski employs the question-and-response format by first asking "What happened?" and then proceeding to answer that question in a series of episodes which appear to be digressive but are, like Crane's individual sections of The Bridge, essential to our understanding of the poem as a whole.

Through this process of gradual disclosure, Wakoski seeks to interest the reader not only in learning the particular secret or secrets around which the poem is constructed but also the nature of the revelation process itself. By unraveling Wakoski's narratives, the reader becomes, like the poet, one of those imaginative individuals who, as Adena Rosmarin notes, is "a practitioner of becoming rather than a seeker after being" (122). The fundamental truth that lies at the base of Wakoski's personal narratives is that life is an on-going process of self-discovery which can be aided by exercising the human imagination. As Charles Olson remarks in "Projective Verse," "So, is it not the PLAY of a mind we are after, is not that that shows whether a mind is there at all?" (19). For Wakoski, as for Olson,

the essence of selfhood is vested in the imagination.

In exercising her own imagination to create poetry, Wakoski also works toward developing an idiom which responds to the concerns expressed by the first-generation of Modernist poets, yet also transforms their language as it, too, is becoming conventionalized. Wakoski has continued the early Modernists' experimentation with prose as a primary means of extending their pioneering of an American idiom. She explains, with regard to the formulation of a contemporary poetic language, that "the struggle for the common voice involves the acceptance of prose as poetic" (Personal Interview). As noted earlier, Wakoski was influenced by Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads because of its innovative handling of language. In addition, Whitman must be cited as one of Wakoski's precursors concerning the function of prose in poetry, for, as James E. Miller, Jr. explains, "Whitman's prose pieces "frequently were published as integral parts of his epic work, Leaves of Grass" (The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction 47). The link between Whitman's essays and Wakoski's prose pieces lies in the democratic spirit behind both poets' usage, specifically in their attacks on the established poetic--and socio-political--order

and their call for artists and critics to embrace, rather than denigrate, the "crudeness," as Wakoski calls it, which is essential to the American character.

Wakoski has also acknowledged the influence on her own epic of Williams' use of prose material in Paterson. As noted earlier, Wakoski, like Williams, views history as an appropriate source of material for the creation of an American literature and she crafts a "personal mythology" in her poetry which includes prominent historical and literary figures. In addition to Williams' Paterson, Wakoski has probably looked to Wallace Stevens' work, particularly his "Three Academic Pieces," for a model for Greed.¹⁰ In this work, Stevens presents a prose apology for poetry as an introduction to the three "academic" poems which follow. Wakoski is noted for the incorporation of similar prose arguments into her work.

However, Wakoski's prose is more personal and immediate in tone than Stevens', which maintains a formal distance in its arguments, or Williams' prose in Paterson, even if we take into account the Cress letters. For although Williams incorporates direct criticism of his work into his epic, Wakoski goes a step further by making a direct response to her critics in a

voice which seems to be that of the flesh-and-blood author. By employing this voice, which appears to break down the barrier that separates art from life, Wakoski once again causes the reader some discomfort because she has broached another sensitive issue. Should the artist rail against her critics in her poetry, without having to control the poetic voice so that it yields the expected formal distance, or is she allowed to do so only within the confines of a critical essay? Wakoski's poetic voice urges us to become aware of these genre barriers and, further, to consider they are justifiable.

Wakoski has also been criticized for the inclusion of prose pieces, such as personal letters and diary entries, in her poetry. Such criticism presumes that these prose pieces have a prior existence and, if they do, that they cannot also have a separate existence as the material of art. In defense of her use of such realistic prose material, Wakoski explains:

A poem is not the same as an entry in your diary. Or a letter to someone. It is an object that's been made in a very special way, even if it comes from the same kind of material you might use in your diary.... (Petroski 43)

Because Wakoski is able to "enchant" us with her narratives, we find ourselves making the assumption that the prose passages somehow exist outside of the poem, in "real" life, and that the poem consists only of those sections which we identify visually and rhythmically as poetry. Our reacting to the prose as a frame for the poetry testifies to the success of Wakoski's art. Moreover, literary critics have not condemned Williams for the inclusion of Cress' letters in Paterson, although these letters are known to have existed as actual correspondence prior to their use in Williams' epic. This suggests that it is not Wakoski's use of actual letters and diary entries--if that is, in fact, what they are--that is upsetting but, rather, her breeching of the implicit generic convention which states that such materials must be clearly demarcated as to their generic alliance. As is the case with her "autobiographical" references, Wakoski's purposeful refusal to identify her prose as either "real" or imagined, i.e., her "misuse" of generic conventions, forces the reader to reconsider the relationship between life and art.

Another feature of Wakoski's poetry which identifies her as a second-generation Modernist is the way in which she constructs an American idiom. In his

discussion of "confessional" poetry, Robert Phillips notes that it "is an antielegant mode whose candor extends even to the language in which the poems are cast" (9). Wakoski would concur that elegance is of little importance to her and is, in any case, an anti-democratic sentiment. Her primary objective is "eloquence," by which she means transforming the vernacular usage of the day or, as Olson remarks, the language that is heard by the ear, into a poetic idiom. While Wordsworth and Williams strove to devise an idiom which is representative of ordinary speech, Wakoski seeks to extend their work by creating an idiom based on language generally thought to be unsuitable for public occasions and, therefore, reserved for private conversation. As Joyce Carol Oates remarks, Wakoski's idiom is characteristically "daring, domestic, conversational and hard-edged" (55); it embodies these seemingly contradictory traits because it does not employ a "public" language. In Greed 9, for example, the speaker admonishes Sylvia Plath for taking her own life, exclaiming: "Sylvia,/you fine-grained piece of white bread" (110). This idiom is startling, not because it contains expletives, but because it expresses the crudeness inherent in "private" vernacular usage. Wakoski employs a similar idiom in

her essay, "A Response to Frederick Turner," in which her language makes clear her commitment to the use of a private American colloquial idiom. She replies to Dr. Turner, who laments the writing in America:

Dr. Turner, I send you this message
via Pony Express.... 'Come to The West
....It's beautiful here, and we'd like
to share it with you. Once you get
used to the idea that people talk funny,
it's great.' (183)

For Wakoski, this acknowledgment of the private American dialect is essential to the creation of an authentic idiom. She believes that "crudeness is America's beauty--it's what Europeans love about America, but Americans have not been able to accept" (Personal Interview).

With her concentration on the taboo aspects of life, including the poetic use of private vernacular speech, Wakoski risks having charges of confessionalism and ineptitude being brought against her work. But, as Alan Williamson remarks, she is "deliberately choosing the most uncompromising materials in order to redeem from within our commonplace, confused ways of 'telling our troubles'" (165). Wakoski believes that to do

anything less than declare that private language and the private life of the self are the core of our lives and, therefore, the appropriate foundation for her poetry, is to avoid the expression of our personal reality and to create a poetic form which does not authentically chronicle the "tale of the tribe."¹¹

The Metapoetic Voice in "Greed"

As I noted earlier, in devising her narrative, Wakoski employs a persona who has often been mistaken for the flesh-and-blood author. This is due, in part, to the fact that the speaker's voice is an intimate one which relates a detailed emotional life. Further, in telling the story, Wakoski uses a "private" vernacular idiom derived from the language of personal interchange, rather than the "public" colloquial idiom that is more commonly found in poetic works. Finally, Wakoski incorporates what appear to be actual letters, diary entries and other prose pieces into her work which cause the reader to wonder whether the prose constitutes a part of the poem or exists apart from it in the "real" world. However, there is an aspect of Wakoski's poetic voice which should counteract the perception that her poetry

is autobiographical or "confessional." In Greed, as in other poems, Wakoski's persona undergoes gender changes, from masculine to feminine and vice versa, which clearly define her persona as an artistic construct. Changes in the persona's gender not only affect the speaker's voice but also the metapoetic voice of the epic.

These gender shifts occur as part of Wakoski's chronicling of the relationship between man and woman, between the male and female aspects of the psyche and between those larger, oppositional forces in the universe which she construes in terms of a male and female principle. In Greed 4, for example, she first presents a male speaker--"How can I sign myself?/Other than as/a greedy man?"--who changes, two stanzas later, into a female speaker--"An answer/could be in your hand,/your face,/your moustache/brushing my lips"--as a symbolic means of indicating the desire of both male and female for completion by their opposite number (54, 55). Later, in Greed 8, the controlling voice is that of an omniscient narrator who reveals her desire to unite the male and female elements:

I would like to marry my Body-of-Christ
waitress to the singer of dark sad

music, who uses the owl to represent himself, and who has always walked through the world whistling a golden piccolo that disarms his listeners. I would like to give her some of his luck and even things out, for I am always greedy to play god, but that is not what life is about.

(99)

In the end, the speaker acknowledges the difference between the real and the ideal world. Within the realm of art, the poet cannot "play God" and produce a perfect union of the two. Instead, she must balance out the ugliness that exists in the world by evoking the beauty which the imagination makes possible.

Throughout Greed, Wakoski changes the gender of the persona to suit the needs of her argument. As Catherine Gannon and Clayton Lein note:

because [Wakoski] feels so keenly the duality of her existence--male freedom and female identity--she never ceases for long to experiment with the idea that the images she will find most expressive of herself will contain male as well as female elements. (89)

In this passage, Gannon and Lein point out one of the primary reasons for Wakoski's change of voice: the need to reconcile her female identity with the greater freedom which society grants to the male as an individual and as an artist. In her earlier work "Justice Is Reason Enough," Wakoski explored this theme in a tale of incest between a brother and sister named David and Diane. As she explains:

The incest story was a psychological
splitting of the female and male sides
of myself and feeling that, culturally,
I had to murder the male side to free
myself to be what I had the potential
to be. (Personal Interview)

Unfortunately, several critics perceived the poem to be autobiographical and castigated it as no more than a confession of incestuous behavior. In actuality, Wakoski has no brother named David nor any brothers at all. However, through twenty-seven years of publishing more than thirty collections of poetry, Wakoski has been unable to completely dispel the myth that her poetry is thinly-disguised autobiography, despite the constant gender shifting that is a primary characteristic of the poetic persona throughout her work.

Wakoski's voice has also been falsely construed as feminist and ironic at certain times when it is not meant to be because she often employs masculine pronouns as universal pronouns. For instance, after introducing both a female and a male speaker in Greed 5, Wakoski shifts into the voice of her "universal" poetic persona who states: "There is only one thing you can honor a man for:/transforming his suffering into something beautiful" (69). This same voice offers us a didactic lesson in Greed 8:

What is a philosopher?

He is a man who gives no one the benefit
of the doubt.

What is the artist?

He gives us something beautiful in the
darkness.

What is failure?

The man who cannot live his own destiny.

(103)

When stating her basic beliefs concerning the individual or the artist, Wakoski usually employs masculine pronouns as genderless pronouns. In this manner, she both acknowledges the domination of the male in society and assumes male power by transforming the connotative

meaning of the pronouns. She is not completely at ease with this assumption of power; however, she is able to exploit the tension between the assertive and passive elements of her personality in her poetry:

I want to talk about how much easier
my life would be
if I were the sun
and not the moon,
if I were a man, not a woman

(Greed 11:128)

These lines are deceptive because one realizes after reading Greed that being at ease has never been Wakoski's goal; without the tension created by the opposing forces in life, she would lose her calling as an artist. She does not wish to merge the male and female aspects of the self but, rather, to maintain a balance between them which will reveal their antagonistic and complementary relationship.

Another conclusion that we may draw from examining the metapoetic voice in Greed is that Wakoski's world, with its Modernist perspective, focuses on the process, rather than the progress, of life. In the Preface to Greed, Wakoski notes that, while she had originally conceived of her long poem as having four

parts, she now perceives it to be "an open-ended poem that I could spend the rest of my life writing if I wanted to" (9). Wakoski, like Whitman, views her literary work as a continuous whole and a lifelong opportunity for artistic creation. She has made this clear by her objection to having her poetry anthologized because, to her mind, her individual poems are not free-standing; rather, each one is part of an evolving poetic discourse on life. Greed itself remains a work-in-progress as Part 10 has never been written. There is a note of intention holding its place in the 1987 volume which contains The Collected Greed, Parts 1-13. The title alone suggests that additional sections may be added to the poem at a later date.

Wakoski not only refuses to achieve closure in Greed but, like Crane and Williams, resists completing the poem without the assistance of her reader. In "How do you tell a story?," which operates as both fiction and meta-fiction, the poet's persona remarks, after offering a somewhat didactic lesson concerning the value of grace under pressure, "This story didn't really come out as I expected it to./I haven't been able to make you understand..." (The man who shook hands 63). This statement forces the reader to comprehend the poetic

narrative as artifice and, further, urges the reader to consider whether he or she has understood what the poet has been saying. Thus, the metapoetic voice insists that the narrative act can only be completed with the reader's participation.

Wakoski constructs a similar participatory narrative in "The Parable of Power" section of Greed 11. After initiating her parable about the osprey sisters, Wakoski's persona interrupts the tale to address the reader in much the same way that the "Dear Reader" asides are employed in the Victorian novel:

Now, those of you who read fables and parables know that I must have figured out some possible ending for this story, either to prove that love is all-powerful or to prove that it's not. Any of you readers who are used to Wakoski's stories are more likely to think that I will give a long, meditative, not-very-story-like ending to the tale, which will turn out to be a discussion of ethics or morality. But I would like to surprise all the readers by ending this story in quite another way entirely. (141)

In this passage, the metapoetic voice reveals Wakoski's implicit desire for a reader who is willing to form a long-term relationship with her, one who will "reciprocate" by coming to know her poetry as the poet has come to know the reader's needs.

She continues her aside to the reader by asking "What if I invent[?]" and then offering an ending for her parable. However, the prefacing of the tale's end with the question "What if I invent[?]" foregrounds the narrative as an art form which not only must be constructed but is imparted to a reader who must then validate it by replying to the question. This poet, too, seeks an affirmative response, one that confirms that her narrative "will suffice."

The invented ending of "The Parable of Power," which clearly has a metafictional dimension, states that "power is easily lost simply trying to exercise it"; however, we can "hold the world together for small moments..." (141). In closing Part 11, Wakoski encourages her reader to take the risk of participating with the poet in the imaginative act, for the reward in those "small moments," as in Wordsworth's "spots of time," is a reunification of the spirit.

Wakoski also urges her reader's participation in her narrative, in the Introduction to Greed 9, by employing, as Rosellen Brown characterizes it, not her "broad and profane" voice, but her "more precise and intellectualizing" one (58):

I don't know that the reader ever has to honor the purpose of the writer, if for no other reason than that we seldom really know what we're doing when we are creating a poem--it being one of those dark and desperate journeys. But if you are a reader who cares about my reasons for writing the poem, then I am happy to have shared my sense of them. May the poem in some way speak for you too. (108)

In daring to use a voice that is so close to that of the flesh-and-blood author, Wakoski risks the charge of being autobiographical so that she can persuade her readers to commit themselves to exercising their imaginative faculties. Yet she is confident that this voice is another facet of the "truth of disguise," as she calls it, i.e., she understands any presentation of her self within the framework of the poem to be a fictive

entity. In an earlier work, entitled "Follow That Stagecoach," she explains concerning this persona:

Walking naked is her most frequent disguise
it disarms everyone

The world by now takes her up and tries to
make her wear the right disguises she
says no no no I will go where I want
when I want to

So I'll write you a love poem if I want
to. I'm a westerner and not afraid
of my shadow. (Discrepancies and
Apparitions 13)

Wakoski also realizes that in order to satisfy her reader, she must be bold in her attempt to construct a new poetic form. She comprehends the reader's "greed," or desire for a meaningful existence, as well as she understands her own. As Annie Dillard, the essayist and novelist, expresses it:

Why are we reading, if not in hope of
beauty laid bare, life heightened and
its deepest mystery probed? Can the
writer isolate and vivify all in experience that most deeply engages our
intellects and our hearts? Can the

writer renew our hopes for literary forms?
 Why are we reading, if not for hope that
 the writer will magnify and dramatize
 our days, will illuminate and inspire us
 with wisdom, courage and the hope of
 meaningfulness, and press upon our minds
 the deepest mysteries, so we may feel
 again their majesty and power? (23)

It is Wakoski's hope that she can reveal those mysteries
 through a poetics of selfhood. She remarks of her art:

The artist becomes the art by bursting
 through the mirror of self and reflect-
 ing back. And this, of course, is not
 a new image. That's the image of Narcis-
 sus falling into the pool and becoming im-
 mortal. I totally subscribe to art in
 love with the vision of the artist. And,
 in the same way, follow that process in
 the act of creating these characters that
 are both completely outside of self and
 reflections of self. The self you can
 never be in real life. The other half
 of feminine which is masculine. The
 other half of the real which is imaginary.

The other half of the visionary which is practical. I'm always looking for those trades back and forth. The mirror image is for me an essential conception in terms of art. Art is a process of life.

(Goya 250-251)

Wakoski's affirmation of art as a process of life is emblematic of the Modernist poet's vision of art as a continuous process of the reformulation and renewal of life through art.

Notes

¹ This statement and parts of the discussion which follow are based on a lecture given by Diane Wakoski at the University of Illinois at Chicago on April 22, 1988 entitled "Whitman? No, Wordsworth: The Song of Myself." Future references will be cited parenthetically in the text as "UIC Lecture." Wakoski also granted the author a taped interview on April 23, 1988 from which an edited transcript was made. Any reference to material from this interview will be cited parenthetically in the text as "Personal Interview" and is protected as copyrighted material © 1988 by Jane Cocalis.

² Preface to Lyrical Ballads, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford UP, 1984): 601.

³ Among those who have accused Wakoski, and other contemporary poets, of a simple recording of emotion is Alan Williamson, who assesses her style as based on a "lack of critical distance on feelings of self-pity and defensive anger...." See Introspection and Contemporary Poetry (Harvard UP, 1984): 164. See also Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1973) and Marjorie Perloff The Dance of the Intellect (NY: Cambridge UP, 1985).

4 "An Essay on Revision" in Diane Wakoski, Toward a New Poetry (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1980): 124. All future references to material from this volume will be cited as TNP along with the page number if the reference is to one of Wakoski's essays; in the case of interviews, the citation will give the interviewer's last name and the page number.

5 Wakoski notes that Paterson, along with In the American Grain, influenced the development of her George Washington poems and Greed. See "William Carlos Williams: The Poet's Poet," Sagetrieb 3 (Fall 1984): 45.

6 Diane Wakoski, The Collected Greed, Parts 1-13 (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Pr, 1984): 150-151. Future references will be cited parenthetically in the text by Part and page number, e.g., Greed 12:150-151.

7 Diane Wakoski, "How do you tell a story?," in The man who shook hands (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978): 61.

8 "Justice Is Reason Enough," reprinted in Diane Wakoski, Emerald Ice: Selected Poems, 1962-1987 (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Pr, 1988): 15.

9 Wakoski was trained as a pianist and comments in "The Blue Swan: An Essay on Music in Poetry": "The nature of music is that you must hear all the digressions. For they are sometimes called variations, and they are sometimes called overtures, and, in fact, I think you can probably think of some other names for them." (TNP 198)

10 Wakoski has often cited Wallace Stevens as one of the chief influences on her work.

11 This phrase is attributed to Rudyard Kipling and later used by Ezra Pound in describing his own work. It is also the title of Michael Bernstein's 1980 study of Modernist poetry.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

"Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or that it is that,
But do not use the rotted names."

--Wallace Stevens

As Modernist poets, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams and Diane Wakoski share a belief that art not only will survive in the modern era but will be instrumental in articulating the dissociated sensibility of the time and moving toward some resolution of it. In that regard, these poets envision themselves as heroic questors in their attempts to devise a poetic strategy for their age.

The Modernist poets are concerned primarily with crafting a form for the work which will engage the contemporary reader. Recalling Williams' comment concerning the work of James Joyce, the goal is to invent a form of thought that brings "the reader into a new and special frame of mind favorable to the receipt of [the] disclosure." In sum, this disclosure is a

realization of identity: the determination of one's self and one's role in American society. Although this realization has been achieved by previous generations, it can only occur again under certain circumstances. The poet must be able to build a new artifice, one that does not depend upon the "rotted names" but, rather, invents new terms to promote the reader's self-recognition. As Walter Sutton notes, "There is a creative power in the energy released by the emergence of new forms..." (252), and it is this enabling power with which the poets seek to invest their epic poetry.

All three poets are committed, not to making up a new language to realize this objective--although Crane does employ a large and sometimes obscure vocabulary in his work--but, rather, to experimenting with the language as it exists. They hope, through the juxtaposition and recombination of words and phrase motifs, to break through an older order of connotative meaning to engender a new one. The Bridge, as do Paterson and Greed, depends heavily upon a collage-like arrangement of motifs to provoke a renewed awareness of the possibilities of language in the reader.

Furthermore, there is a great effort made in each of these epics to set poetry free from the "logic

of reason" which the Modernists believe contributed to the philosophical breakdown that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. Rationalism includes among its premises an idea of progress as the goal of artistic endeavor. The Modernists discard this notion in favor of a commitment to presenting the process of life, replete with its nonrational and overlapping circumstances. It is the breadth and complexity of daily living, with its multiple and at times contradictory meanings, which Crane, Williams and Wakoski wish to depict. These poets support Keats in his call for an exercise of "negative capability," which is characterized by Ellmann and Feidelson in The Modern Tradition as "the acceptance of uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without any compulsion to resolve them in rational terms or to weigh them by factual probability" (10). To this end, the strategy of the Modernist poets has been to develop a formal structure that will evoke a cluster of associative meanings in the reader's mind without attempting to formulate a "grand" solution.

The lack of an ultimate, conclusive statement identifies these epics as "process" poems and, as such, they tend to remain open-ended. Although the thematic

structure of The Bridge, which depicts the fluctuation of human life between the opposing forces of joy and despair, would seem to present a closed scheme, Crane, nevertheless, holds the poem open to a certain extent by employing a highly metaphorical language and concluding his epic with a question. These tactics are meant to draw the reader into an active engagement with the poem, and if the strategy is successful, the reader will become involved in the completion of the poem.

While Williams' idiom is initially less demanding than Crane's, he also expects his readers to actively participate in the construction of the meaning of the poem. They must assist the poet in freeing up the language of the past, as it is found in historical tracts, literary works, personal correspondence and other sources, in order to make the past "usable" in the present. In addition, Williams challenges the reader by incorporating an older and considerably changed persona into the fifth Book of Paterson. This speaker's perspective "disrupts" the overall point of view which Williams has established in the first four Books of his epic and thereby calls upon the readers of the poem to come to terms with a new, and less integrated, form of the epic.

Wakoski extends Williams' usage of the colloquial idiom as the basis for poetic language by employing the vocabulary of private conversation in Greed. This is one facet of her overall strategy of presenting those "taboo" aspects of life which she believes will reveal the essential nature of human existence. The poetic language of Greed, like that of Paterson, appears to be a straightforward one. However, Wakoski employs it to probe the secrets of the human psyche and, consequently, her idiom causes the reader to suffer some emotional discomfort for the sake of achieving a fuller sense of self and cultural identity.

In creating their epic poems, these three poets have been highly conscious of the work of other epic poets. Perhaps the most influential of these is T.S. Eliot, who, with his view that the present lacks the potential to live up to what he posits as the "golden age" of literature, relegates poetry in the twentieth century to the role of supporting a reaffirmation of faith in the established religious tradition. In their desire to counter Eliot's view, Crane, Williams and such second-generation Modernist poets as Wakoski, have turned to the work of Walt Whitman to locate a basis

for a new poetic tradition in America. Whitman, and his Modernist successors, are committed to the idea that America has a "crude" beauty which has not been sufficiently elucidated as yet.

Williams also believes the failure of the American tradition to take hold is due, in part, to a failure of history. The heritage of our relatively young nation has been reduced to dry events categorized and shelved in the libraries where they remain "frozen." Crane and Wakoski join Williams in attempting imaginative recreations of American life in the hope of restoring vitality to events and figures which, collectively, might constitute a usable past for the United States.

Because they do not wish simply to displace one version of history with another, these Modernist poets offer their depictions within the framework of a series of questions and responses which, by their very structure, refuse to offer a "cure-all" for the age. First, the question-and-response format establishes the poet's view that this is, as Williams stated, a "pre-masterly era," one in which poets must be concerned with the posing of questions with the idea of generating a discussion of possible solutions. While the poet acts as a spiritual leader, he or she no longer claims an

intimate, or divinely-inspired, knowledge of answers but, rather, hopes to guide the reader by creating a framework which will facilitate the perception of modern reality. Finally, the pattern of questions offers a repeated invitation to the reader to participate actively, and even "aggressively," as Joel Conarroe remarks, in the search for meaning.

The metapoetic voice of these poets reveals them to be less confident and all-knowing than the poets of the earlier epic tradition. Because of their stance, which is in many respects a direct response to what they perceive as Eliot's capitulation to a lost tradition, the Modernist poets perhaps are best characterized as artists, to employ Williams' phrase, who "witness and adjust" in the hope that their poetic experiments will yield the necessary form for the epic in the modern age.

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

July 27, 1989
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